

The Role of Cannabis in Indian Traditions and Its Evolving Perception Among Youth

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doi.org/10.64643/IJIRT12I6-186753-459

Abstract—This study explores the psychological and cultural dimensions of marijuana usage in Indian society through qualitative research. By employing in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the research examines the role of marijuana in religious rituals, traditional medicine, and social customs. The findings reveal the deep-rooted historical and spiritual significance of cannabis, along with evolving perceptions influenced by legal frameworks and modernisation. This study underscores the importance of contextual qualitative inquiry in understanding the socio-psychological aspects of marijuana use in India.

Index Terms—Cannabis in India, Marijuana history, Bhang and religion, Psychoactive substances, Indian drug policy, Substance use in India, Cultural perspectives on cannabis, Cannabis and Hinduism, Traditional drug use, Indian narcotics law.

I. INTRODUCTION

Marijuana, or cannabis, has been an integral part of Indian culture for centuries, deeply embedded in religious and traditional practices. Despite its legal restrictions, its usage persists in festivals, spiritual ceremonies, and Ayurveda. While quantitative studies have often examined the prevalence and health effects of marijuana use, qualitative research is essential to understanding the lived experiences, social constructs, and psychological motivations behind its consumption. This paper investigates the cultural and psychological dimensions of marijuana usage in India, focusing on its ritualistic significance, social acceptance, and evolving perspectives.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical and Religious Context

The historical use of cannabis in India is ancient, with its roots firmly planted in the spiritual, medicinal, and cultural traditions of the region. Cannabis, referred to

as bhang, ganja, and charas in various forms, has been an integral part of Indian society for thousands of years. The plant's association with spirituality, religious practices, and medicine dates back to at least the Vedic period, making it one of the oldest psychoactive substances used in recorded history.

The earliest reference to cannabis in India appears in the Atharvaveda (c. 1500–500 BCE), one of the four Vedic texts of Hinduism. In this ancient scripture, cannabis is described as one of the five sacred plants, or "Pancha Mahabhutas," which were believed to possess divine and protective qualities. The Atharvaveda attributes various benefits to cannabis, from its ability to alleviate pain and improve well-being to its role in spiritual practices. As such, it was not only seen as a helpful herb but also as a plant imbued with sacred qualities. The significance of cannabis as a divine plant is evident in its inclusion in religious offerings and rituals during this period, suggesting its early integration into the fabric of Indian spiritual life (Saraswati, 2011).

Throughout ancient India, cannabis was primarily used in religious rituals and as a sacrament. Its psychoactive effects were believed to enhance the worship of deities, particularly Lord Shiva, who is often depicted in Hindu mythology as a deity with a deep connection to asceticism and altered states of consciousness. In this context, cannabis consumption was thought to help individuals transcend their earthly existence and attain a higher state of spiritual awareness. It is said that Lord Shiva himself favoured cannabis for this purpose, and, according to certain mythologies, the plant was discovered by his followers after a celestial accident when the plant's properties were revealed to the divine (Rastogi & Pandey, 2012). The consumption of cannabis for religious purposes continued to gain prominence through the centuries. By the time of the Upanishads (c. 800–400 BCE), cannabis had become a recognised offering in the

rituals associated with gods, particularly Lord Shiva. The most common form of consumption was bhang, a preparation made by grinding the leaves and flowers of the cannabis plant into a paste and mixing it with milk, water, or yoghurt. Bhang was used during major Hindu festivals, such as Shivaratri and Holi, to invoke the blessings of deities and to induce a state of ritual ecstasy. The preparation of bhang was accompanied by prayers, offerings, and specific religious incantations (Mane, 2014).

In addition to its religious applications, cannabis was widely used for medicinal purposes in ancient India. Traditional Indian medicine, or Ayurveda, which originated over 2,000 years ago, recognised cannabis as a medicinal plant with a range of therapeutic benefits. Ancient Ayurvedic texts, such as the Sushruta Samhita and the Charaka Samhita, describe cannabis as a remedy for various conditions, including pain, digestive disorders, and insomnia. The plant was also believed to have aphrodisiac, sedative, and appetite-stimulating properties. As a result, cannabis was prescribed as a remedy for physical ailments, and its psychoactive effects were regarded as useful for both medical and spiritual purposes (Jain, 2016).

During the mediaeval period, cannabis continued to play a role in both religious and medicinal practices. The Mughal Empire (1526–1857) saw the refinement of cannabis consumption with the creation of new preparations such as *major* (a cannabis-based edible) and *ganja* (the concentrated form of cannabis). Cannabis use expanded beyond the religious sphere, with both aristocrats and common people using the plant for pleasure, pain relief, and relaxation. Cannabis also began to be linked with social gatherings and was consumed in the form of pipes and hookahs, which became a popular mode of consumption in the royal courts and among the general populace (Saraswati, 2011).

The British Colonial period, beginning in the 18th century, marked a shift in the regulation and perception of cannabis in India. The British, concerned with the growing use of cannabis in India and its perceived association with addiction and social unrest, began to impose stricter regulations on its production and use. The Indian Hemp Drugs Commission was established in 1893 to investigate the prevalence of cannabis use in India. Despite its historical and cultural significance, cannabis was increasingly viewed with suspicion by the colonial administration,

which led to the regulation of its production and trade (Rastogi & Pandey, 2012).

Following India's independence in 1947, the newly formed Indian government continued to address the issue of cannabis use through legislative measures. The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act of 1985 marked a turning point in India's relationship with cannabis, as it criminalised the production, sale, and possession of marijuana. Despite these legal restrictions, the cultural and religious practices involving cannabis have persisted in certain regions of India, where its traditional use is still considered an essential part of religious observance and social life (Jain, 2016).

In summary, the historical background of cannabis in India reveals its deep-rooted connection to the country's religious, cultural, and medicinal traditions. From its early references in the Vedas to its association with Lord Shiva and its widespread use in Ayurvedic medicine, cannabis has been a plant of profound spiritual and practical significance. While its cultural importance has been tempered by legal and social challenges in modern times, the legacy of cannabis in Indian culture continues to shape the ways in which it is viewed and consumed in contemporary society.

III. MARIJUANA IN HINDU RITUALS AND FESTIVALS

Marijuana has long been woven into the fabric of Hindu religious rituals and festivals, where it is utilised not only for its psychoactive effects but also for its perceived spiritual and medicinal benefits. In the context of Hinduism, marijuana, especially in the form of bhang, is seen as a sacred offering to deities, a tool for spiritual enlightenment, and an integral component of celebratory and purification practices. This section explores how marijuana, specifically cannabis and its derivatives, is consumed and revered during Hindu rituals and festivals, with particular focus on its use during Holi and Shivaratri, two of the most significant religious events in the Hindu calendar.

- Cannabis and Lord Shiva

The most notable religious association with marijuana in Hinduism is its connection to Lord Shiva, one of the principal deities of the Hindu pantheon. Lord Shiva is often depicted as a meditative figure, the embodiment

of asceticism, and the god of yogis and sages. According to Hindu mythology, Shiva is believed to have consumed cannabis as part of his ascetic practices to help him achieve higher states of consciousness, meditation, and enlightenment. Cannabis is thought to facilitate a spiritual connection between humans and the divine, helping practitioners transcend the material world and enter a heightened state of awareness.

This association between Shiva and cannabis is most strongly represented during the festival of Mahashivaratri, or the Great Night of Shiva, a major Hindu celebration that honours Lord Shiva and his marriage to Goddess Parvati. On this night, devotees gather to worship Shiva, often staying up throughout the night in meditation and prayer. The consumption of bhang, a cannabis preparation, is a key part of the ritual. Bhang is traditionally made by grinding cannabis leaves and flowers into a paste, which is then mixed with milk, yoghurt, and various spices. This concoction is consumed as an offering to Lord Shiva, with the belief that it will bring blessings, purity, and divine favor to the worshipper.

Devotees often partake in bhang as a way to imitate the spiritual practices of Lord Shiva, who is said to have consumed cannabis to transcend earthly desires and enter a meditative state. By ingesting bhang, worshippers hope to achieve a similar connection to the divine, purify their hearts, and deepen their devotion to Shiva. The use of bhang during Shivaratri also helps to facilitate the intense spiritual atmosphere of the night, where many practitioners engage in hours of prayer, chanting, and meditation, aiming to reach a state of spiritual ecstasy similar to that associated with the god himself (Saraswati, 2011).

- The Role of Bhang in the Holi Festival

Holi, the festival of colours, is another major Hindu celebration where cannabis plays a significant role, especially in the form of bhang. Celebrated at the onset of spring, Holi is a time for joy, renewal, and the breaking of social boundaries. Traditionally, Holi is marked by the throwing of coloured powders, singing, dancing, and feasting. The festival is an expression of the victory of good over evil, symbolized by the burning of the Holika effigy, representing the destruction of evil forces. Amid the celebratory atmosphere, cannabis particularly in the form of bhang is consumed as part of the festivities, contributing to

both the physical enjoyment of the celebration and the spiritual dimension of the event.

Bhang is considered to enhance the joyous spirit of Holi, allowing participants to experience a sense of oneness and blissful detachment from worldly concerns. The consumption of bhang during Holi is often communal, with people gathering in homes or public spaces to prepare and share the cannabis drink. The association of bhang with Holi has its roots in mythology and religious symbolism. According to some traditions, the consumption of bhang during Holi is linked to the love story of Lord Krishna, who, as a young boy, is said to have enjoyed the company of his devotees while drinking bhang, which led to the uninhibited and joyful celebrations that are now a hallmark of the festival.

Moreover, Holi's celebratory spirit encourages the breaking of social norms and the removal of hierarchies, which aligns with the liberating effects that cannabis is believed to have. By consuming bhang, participants symbolically let go of their inhibitions, cast aside societal distinctions, and embrace a sense of collective unity and spiritual harmony. The euphoric experience facilitated by bhang is seen as a means to deepen communal bonds, reinforce social solidarity, and bring about a sense of shared divinity among those partaking in the festivities (Mane, 2014).

- Ritual Use of Cannabis in Other Hindu Practices

Beyond the major festivals of Shivaratri and Holi, marijuana, in the form of bhang, is also used in other Hindu religious practices and rituals. In rural and less formal settings, bhang is consumed during religious ceremonies and temple offerings, particularly in areas where traditional practices remain deeply embedded in the local culture. In these settings, bhang is often regarded as a sacred offering, enhancing the spiritual atmosphere of the ritual and helping worshippers to focus their minds and prayers.

The consumption of bhang is also common among certain sects of ascetics and mystics, such as the sadhus, who are devoted to intense spiritual practice and meditation. Sadhus, often associated with the Shaiva sect of Hinduism, use cannabis as a tool to aid in meditation, seeking to achieve an altered state of consciousness that is conducive to spiritual growth. For these ascetics, cannabis serves as a sacrament, facilitating communion with the divine and enhancing

their ability to meditate for extended periods. In this context, cannabis consumption is not only seen as a religious offering but also as a method for achieving higher states of enlightenment, in line with the practices of Lord Shiva, who is considered the supreme yogi and ascetic (Rastogi & Pandey, 2012).

- **Symbolism and Spiritual Significance of Cannabis in Hindu Rituals**

The spiritual significance of cannabis in Hindu rituals cannot be overstated. Cannabis, particularly in the form of bhang, symbolises detachment from material desires and the elevation of the soul. In the Hindu worldview, the consumption of cannabis helps practitioners transcend the physical realm and connect with the spiritual world, where divine energy and enlightenment reside. The psychoactive properties of cannabis are believed to clear the mind, heighten awareness, and open channels for divine communication, all of which are essential components of the Hindu path toward self-realisation.

In this sense, marijuana serves a dual purpose in Hinduism: it is both a sacrament that brings about spiritual purification and a tool that enables worshippers to experience the divine more intensely. The consumption of bhang, especially during key festivals like Shivaratri and Holi, provides devotees with an opportunity to engage deeply with their spiritual practices, opening the door to heightened experiences of joy, ecstasy, and divine connection (Saraswati, 2011).

IV. CANNABIS AND THE SADHUS

The relationship between cannabis and the sadhus, ascetic practitioners in India, represents one of the most profound and enduring associations of marijuana within Hindu religious practices. Sadhus, often linked with the Shaiva tradition, are revered as individuals who have renounced worldly attachments to seek spiritual enlightenment. For many sadhus, cannabis is not merely a recreational substance but a sacred tool that facilitates deep meditation, spiritual awakening, and communion with the divine. This section explores the role of cannabis in the lives and practices of sadhus, highlighting its significance as a spiritual aid, its cultural context, and its place in asceticism and yogic traditions.

- **The Spiritual Role of Cannabis in Ascetic Practices**

Sadhus, also known as yogis or holy men, are dedicated to achieving a state of spiritual liberation, or moksha, through meditation, self-discipline, and renunciation of worldly pleasures. These ascetics often live outside mainstream society, dwelling in isolated areas such as caves, forests, or temples, where they focus entirely on spiritual practices. One of the core aspects of their spiritual journey is meditation, a process that allows them to transcend their physical existence and connect with the divine. In this context, cannabis is viewed as an aid to meditation, helping sadhus achieve altered states of consciousness and facilitating their deep connection to Lord Shiva.

Cannabis, particularly in the form of ganja (smoked cannabis) and bhang (a cannabis-based drink), is used by many sadhus to deepen their meditative practices. The psychoactive properties of cannabis are believed to help clear the mind of distractions, leading to greater mental focus and concentration. By inducing a heightened state of awareness, cannabis is thought to allow sadhus to access higher spiritual realms, where they can experience divine visions, heightened intuition, and a deeper understanding of the universe. For many, cannabis consumption is seen as a way to achieve a form of spiritual intoxication that transcends the ordinary world, allowing them to enter a state of divine ecstasy that brings them closer to enlightenment (Rastogi & Pandey, 2012).

In the Shaiva tradition, Lord Shiva is often portrayed as a supreme yogi and ascetic who uses cannabis as a means of achieving spiritual transcendence. Since Shiva is considered the patron god of yogis, many sadhus emulate his practices, including the use of cannabis, to cultivate similar spiritual power. The belief that cannabis was a divine gift from Shiva has led many sadhus to incorporate it into their religious practices, viewing it as a sacred offering that enables them to transcend mundane existence and achieve a closer connection with the divine (Saraswati, 2011).

- **The Use of Cannabis in the Rituals of Sadhus**

For sadhus, the consumption of cannabis is deeply ritualistic and is often integrated into their daily practices. Sadhus typically consume cannabis in the form of charas, a potent concentrate of cannabis resin that is smoked in a chillum, a traditional smoking pipe. The chillum itself is symbolic, representing a vessel

through which the ascetic offers themselves to Shiva, and it is often shared in communal settings, reinforcing the social and spiritual bonds between practitioners.

The act of smoking cannabis from a chillum is considered a ritual in itself. It is typically accompanied by chanting, mantras, or prayers, invoking the blessings of Lord Shiva. The cannabis is seen as an offering to Shiva, and the practice of smoking it is regarded as a form of devotion and surrender. By consuming cannabis, sadhus believe they can achieve greater clarity of mind, enter deeper states of meditation, and enhance their spiritual practices. The communal use of cannabis in these rituals also fosters a sense of unity among sadhus, as they gather together to share this sacred substance in pursuit of shared spiritual goals (Mane, 2014).

Additionally, the use of cannabis in these rituals is not limited to solitary practice. During religious festivals such as Mahashivaratri (the night dedicated to Lord Shiva) or Kumbh Mela (the massive pilgrimage and spiritual gathering), sadhus consume cannabis in a group setting as part of the larger spiritual atmosphere. These festivals, which attract thousands of devotees, including sadhus, are times of intense meditation, prayer, and reflection. During such events, the use of cannabis serves to enhance the collective spiritual energy, with sadhus believing that it helps them attain a higher level of divine consciousness during communal worship (Sarawati, 2011).

- **The Role of Cannabis in the Cultivation of Detachment**

The practice of consuming cannabis among sadhus is intimately tied to the broader goals of asceticism in Hinduism. One of the central tenets of asceticism is the renunciation of attachment to material possessions, desires, and sensory pleasures. By removing themselves from society and its distractions, sadhus seek to cultivate a deep sense of detachment, which is believed to be a necessary step toward spiritual liberation. Cannabis is often seen as an aid in this process, allowing practitioners to detach from their physical surroundings and experience a sense of oneness with the universe.

The psychoactive effects of cannabis are thought to help sadhus overcome the grip of worldly attachments, allowing them to focus solely on their spiritual development. Cannabis-induced states of altered consciousness are believed to promote the release of

mental and emotional attachments, facilitating a deeper understanding of the impermanence of life and the importance of spiritual growth. This detachment is not seen as a withdrawal from the world in a negative sense but as a deliberate turning inward toward the divine. By using cannabis, sadhus believe they can more fully embody the teachings of Lord Shiva, who is revered for his ability to transcend worldly desires and remain in a state of constant meditation and bliss (Jain, 2016).

- **Cannabis and the Quest for Liberation**

The ultimate goal of a sadhu's life is to attain moksha the liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Cannabis, as a spiritual tool, is believed to assist in this process by helping the practitioner transcend the limitations of the physical body and mind. The altered states of consciousness induced by cannabis are seen as gateways to spiritual liberation, offering insights into the true nature of existence and the universe. By achieving higher states of awareness, sadhus believe they can move closer to the realization of their divine nature and the ultimate union with the supreme consciousness, Brahman.

Many sadhus believe that cannabis helps them break through the illusion of maya the veil of ignorance that clouds human perception and keeps individuals bound to the material world. In their view, cannabis is a tool that enables them to pierce through this illusion and experience the world as it truly is: a manifestation of divine energy. This spiritual perspective aligns with the teachings of Hindu philosophy, which emphasizes the importance of realizing the unity of all things and transcending the illusion of separation between the self and the universe (Rastogi & Pandey, 2012).

- **Social and Cultural Significance of Cannabis for Sadhus**

Cannabis consumption also serves a social and cultural function among sadhus. The communal smoking of charas or sharing of bhang during festivals and religious gatherings fosters a sense of brotherhood and spiritual unity among sadhus and devotees. These communal rituals reinforce the idea of a shared spiritual journey toward enlightenment, emphasizing that the path to liberation is not only an individual pursuit but also a collective effort. For sadhus, cannabis serves as both a means of personal spiritual

transformation and a symbol of their belonging to a larger spiritual community.

Additionally, the use of cannabis in these rituals helps to distinguish sadhus from ordinary society. Their use of cannabis is a public sign of their asceticism, their renunciation of worldly life, and their commitment to spiritual practice. The visual image of sadhus smoking charas from a chillum, often dressed in ochre robes and adorned with ashes, has become an iconic representation of Hindu asceticism and mysticism, highlighting their connection to the divine and their detachment from material concerns (Mane, 2014).

V. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was adopted, utilising semi-structured interviews with 40 participants across different regions of India. Participants included religious practitioners, traditional healers, recreational users, law enforcement officials, and mental health professionals. A purposive sampling method ensured diversity in perspectives.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in person and via online platforms due to regional constraints. Each session lasted between 45 minutes to an hour, with participants asked about their personal experiences, cultural beliefs, and perceptions regarding marijuana use. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly maintained.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS

A thematic analysis approach was used to identify recurring patterns in the data. Responses were categorized into key themes, including religious significance, medicinal use, legal and social challenges, and generational differences in perception.

VII. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Main Theme 1: Cannabis as a Sacred Conduit in Hindu Religious Experience

Participants consistently emphasized the spiritual centrality of cannabis within Hindu religious practices, viewing it not as a recreational substance but as a sacramental tool that aids in connecting with the divine. Cannabis especially in the form of *bhang*,

ganja, or *charas* was seen to facilitate spiritual elevation, mirror the ascetic practices of Lord Shiva, and serve as a symbol of purity, detachment, and transcendence during key religious festivals like *Mahashivaratri* and *Holi*. Across regional and cultural contexts, participants articulated how cannabis operates within ritual frameworks as a vehicle for devotion, meditation, and spiritual union.

Subtheme 1: Emulating Lord Shiva Through Cannabis Use

Participants rooted their cannabis use in religious mythology, particularly the belief that Lord Shiva himself consumed cannabis as a means to achieve higher states of consciousness. For many, consuming *bhang* or smoking *ganja* was an act of devotional imitation.

"When I drink bhang on Shivaratri, I feel like I'm walking the same path as Shiva. It's not for fun it's for silence, for meditation, for going inward."

"Shiva took bhang to go into samadhi, and we follow him. That's how we feel closer to the divine by following his footsteps."

"It's not intoxication it's liberation. I offer the bhang to Shiva, and then I take it. That is the ritual."

"In our tradition, smoking ganja is part of Shiv bhakti. We light the chillum and chant his name. The smoke is a prayer."

These narratives highlight how cannabis is not perceived as a recreational drug but as a ritual medium of divine emulation, reflecting Hindu ascetic ideals. The symbolic mirroring of Shiva's behavior reinforces spiritual identity and religious authenticity among users.

Subtheme 2: Cannabis as a Tool for Transcendence and Detachment

Cannabis was frequently described as a means to transcend worldly attachments and deepen spiritual awareness, especially among ascetics and rural practitioners. The psychoactive properties of cannabis were viewed as sacred enablers of meditative stillness and mystical experiences.

"Bhang calms the mind. When I close my eyes after drinking it, I can meditate without thoughts disturbing me."

"Charas helps me disconnect from the world. It's not about enjoyment; it's about letting go."

*"You don't feel hunger, ego, or desire. Only peace. That's why cannabis is holy it helps you detach."
"It's like silence enters the body. The noise of the world fades away."*

The language of detachment and spiritual clarity underscores cannabis's ritualistic role in helping practitioners cultivate vairagya (dispassion) and move toward moksha (liberation). In this frame, cannabis functions as a yogic enhancer, rather than a narcotic.

Subtheme 3: Bhang and Charas as Ritual Offerings and Communal Sacraments

Participants emphasized that cannabis is often prepared and consumed communally during rituals, especially during *Holi* and *Mahashivaratri*, signifying spiritual unity, purity, and collective joy. The act of sharing bhang or passing a chillum was not just recreational, but sacramental and symbolic of divine communion.

"During Holi, my whole family drinks bhang together. It's like celebrating God's playfulness."

"On Shivaratri, we all sit in a circle, offer the first chillum to Shiva, then smoke. It's like we are all one with him."

"Drinking bhang together breaks all differences. Caste, age, gender nothing matters when you're with God."

"Even the act of grinding bhang is a ritual. We chant while doing it it's not casual."

Cannabis thus emerges as both a sacred offering to the gods and a medium of horizontal spiritual equality among devotees. These practices reinforce collective devotion, equality, and the joy of divine play (leela), in contrast to individual intoxication.

Subtheme 4: Normalization and Cultural Legitimacy of Cannabis in Hinduism

Many participants especially rural elders and temple priests reiterated that cannabis use was not perceived as drug abuse within the religious context. Instead, it was culturally validated, even encouraged, as part of ancestral practices.

"My grandfather used to say, 'Never drink liquor, but bhang on Shivaratri is a blessing.' It was never taboo."

"It's in our scriptures, in our festivals. How can it be wrong if it's done with devotion?"

"Foreigners think we are drug addicts, but they don't understand our culture. Bhang is spiritual, not criminal."

"For us, bhang is medicine, it's prasad, it's sacred. The law doesn't see that."

These perspectives reflect a cultural legitimization of cannabis rooted in religious authority, intergenerational knowledge, and ritual sanctity. Participants expressed frustration with the disconnect between state law and sacred tradition, suggesting a tension between spiritual values and legal frameworks.

Interpretation and Psychosocial Significance

This theme reveals how cannabis occupies a deeply embedded spiritual role within Hindu religious life, where its use is imbued with ritual significance, moral legitimacy, and transcendental aspirations. Far from being viewed as deviant or illicit, cannabis is integrated into religious life as a tool for spiritual elevation, divine emulation, and community bonding. Participants articulated how cannabis, particularly in the forms of bhang and charas, is normalised within sacred settings, where its consumption enhances devotional states, facilitates meditation, and strengthens the individual's connection to deities, particularly Lord Shiva.

In psychosocial terms, cannabis acts as both a symbol and mechanism of detachment, allowing practitioners to temporarily transcend the ego and sensory world—aligning with Hindu spiritual ideals of non-attachment, oneness, and moksha. The collective consumption of cannabis in festivals also reflects its role in promoting social harmony and communal identity, providing a counterpoint to Western narratives of drug use as isolating or hedonistic.

Main Theme 2: Cannabis as Folk Medicine and Ayurvedic Healer

Across rural, tribal, and alternative healing communities in India, cannabis was commonly portrayed not as an intoxicant but as a medicinal herb rooted in ancestral wisdom and Ayurvedic tradition. Participants described how *bhanga*, *ganja*, and cannabis-infused oils were historically and even presently used for treating ailments ranging from insomnia to digestive issues, mental agitation, and chronic pain. The use of cannabis in these contexts was framed not only as therapeutic but also as culturally

sanctioned, passed down through generations, and intertwined with spiritual wellness.

Subtheme 1: Cannabis in Ayurvedic and Traditional Healing Systems

Participants with backgrounds in folk medicine, Ayurveda, and rural healing consistently emphasized the time-honored status of cannabis as a healing plant, referencing its Sanskrit name *Vijaya* and its classification in ancient Ayurvedic texts.

"In Ayurveda, cannabis is not a drug it is a medicine. We use it in very small doses to calm the nerves, help digestion, and aid sleep."

"My guru taught me how to prepare bhang for stomach issues. You mix it with fennel and ghee it works wonders."

"Cannabis oil is very good for joint pain. In our village, we rub it on elderly people's knees. It's better than any English medicine."

"When I had anxiety and couldn't sleep, my uncle made me drink bhang with milk. It worked better than tablets."

These insights underscore the phytotherapeutic legitimacy cannabis holds within traditional Indian systems. Far from recreational, cannabis is seen as part of a holistic, dosha-based treatment philosophy, where balance and moderation are emphasized. Its therapeutic efficacy is valued in contexts where biomedical access is limited, and cultural trust in folk remedies remains strong.

Subtheme 2: Generational Transmission of Cannabis-Based Home Remedies

Cannabis-based healing practices were often described as familial knowledge, passed orally across generations, especially in rural and tribal settings. Elder participants recounted stories of grandparents using bhang or charas for ailments, suggesting the intergenerational resilience of these traditions.

"My grandmother used to boil cannabis leaves and give it to us when we had fever or couldn't sleep. We trusted it more than hospital medicine."

"It was normal for us to make a paste of ganja leaves for toothache or migraines. My mother taught me that."

"Our elders always kept a small packet of dried leaves at home. We didn't call it ganja—it was medicine, like haldi or tulsi."

"My father was an herbalist. He used to mix cannabis with ashwagandha and honey for stress. I still make it for my husband."

These narratives reflect how cannabis has been domesticated into household remedies, treated with the same reverence and routine as other natural ingredients. The oral transmission of ethnomedicinal knowledge ensures cultural continuity, even in the face of modern legal and scientific marginalization.

Subtheme 3: Cannabis as Mental and Emotional Stabilizer

Several participants especially older rural individuals and traditional healers discussed how cannabis was historically used to address mental and emotional disturbances. From anxiety and insomnia to grief and spiritual imbalance, cannabis was described as a natural mind-soother, often used before psychiatry was accessible.

"In our village, if someone was restless or seeing spirits, they gave him ganja smoke not pills. It calmed them."

"When my son was crying all the time after his wife died, we gave him bhang in warm milk. After that, he could sleep peacefully."

"If someone had too many thoughts, my uncle would say: 'Take this with ghee and don't speak for an hour.' That was his therapy."

"In small doses, cannabis can reduce fear, silence the mind, and bring calm. That's why sadhus and healers both use it."

This reveals a pre-modern psychosocial understanding of cannabis as a natural tranquilizer, integrated into community wellness responses. The substance was often spiritually interpreted as removing "heat" or "agitation" from the body-mind system, echoing Ayurvedic energetics and indigenous psychiatry.

Subtheme 4: Legal Barriers and the Decline of Cannabis in Mainstream Healing

Despite this rich tradition, many participants lamented the criminalization of cannabis, which they felt has discouraged younger healers and led to medical stigma. Practitioners explained that state bans have eroded confidence in these traditional treatments, creating a loss of herbal heritage.

“Because it’s banned, young vaidyas are scared to use it even though it works. We are losing that part of Ayurveda.”

“Now everything is about pharma and tablets. No one wants to listen when we say cannabis is good for the stomach or mind.”

“The law sees it as a drug, but in our village, it is a cure. People now fear what they once trusted.”

“Even if it’s medicine, the police don’t understand. That’s why most healers keep it hidden now.”

These accounts highlight the tensions between traditional epistemologies and state-imposed legal frameworks, which have stigmatized a once-accepted remedy. The medicalisation of healing and urbanisation of health systems have marginalized cannabis as folk knowledge, pushing it out of legitimate discourse.

Interpretation and Psychosocial Significance

This theme illustrates how cannabis, historically embedded in India’s indigenous medical systems and healing narratives, continues to be valued as a therapeutic agent in contexts where biomedical access is limited or culturally alien. Cannabis is perceived by participants as a herbal healer, not only for physical ailments but for psychosomatic and emotional conditions, reflecting a holistic view of health that integrates the body, mind, and spirit.

The findings also reveal a psycho-cultural dualism: cannabis as a sacred and healing plant in rural contexts vs. its stigmatization in legal-medical discourse. Participants expressed dismay over the cultural erasure of cannabis-based knowledge due to criminalization, pointing to a broader disconnect between traditional ecological knowledge and modern policy. The implications are significant for public health and cultural preservation, especially as global discourse on medical marijuana gains traction.

Main Theme 3: Cannabis as a Generational and Cultural Mirror

Cannabis emerged as a symbolic reflection of shifting values across generations and geographies in India. Participants’ narratives revealed how perceptions of marijuana were shaped not only by religion and tradition, but also by age, urbanization, and sociocultural location. For older generations and rural communities, cannabis was described as a natural, spiritual, and medicinal plant. In contrast, younger

participants particularly from urban areas—often viewed cannabis in terms of rebellion, self-medication, identity, or stress relief. These generational and regional divergences created a complex mosaic of meanings, revealing that cannabis in India cannot be understood as a singular phenomenon, but must be read through the lens of context and cultural evolution.

Subtheme 1: Reverence and Ritual among Older Generations

Elder participants especially in rural and semi-rural regions voiced a protective, reverential view of cannabis, seeing it as a divine gift and integral to spiritual and healing traditions. They criticized modern views that labeled cannabis use as deviant or criminal.

“In my time, bhang was offered to God before anything else. It was never considered a bad thing—it was a part of worship.” (Participant 1, 74-year-old male, Uttar Pradesh)

“We took bhang to purify ourselves before fasting, not to get intoxicated. Now people say it’s a drug—it hurts to hear that.” (Participant 10, 68-year-old female, Madhya Pradesh)

“Young people don’t know its real meaning. They use it like alcohol. But for us, it was sacred.” (Participant 7, 63-year-old village priest, Uttarakhand)

“When I was a child, bhang was made fresh during Holi. My grandmother would bless it before drinking.” (Participant 14, 60-year-old male, Bihar)

These reflections suggest a moral-spiritual orientation to cannabis, where its use was tied to ritual, community, and balance. Elders often positioned themselves as cultural custodians, lamenting the loss of reverence for cannabis in the current generation.

Subtheme 2: Rebellion, Stress, and Self-Medication Among Youth

Younger participants especially from urban environments spoke about cannabis as part of contemporary youth culture, often framed around identity, freedom, creativity, and emotional regulation. For them, cannabis was detached from religion and largely understood through a psychosocial lens.

“It helps me sleep. I’m not doing it for fun. It’s the only thing that calms my anxiety after work.” (Participant 38, 23-year-old male, Bengaluru)

“I don’t believe in God or rituals, but weed helps me focus when I make music. It’s part of the vibe.” (Participant 36, 21-year-old female, Mumbai)

“In college, we all smoked up. It was a way to connect, to feel free, to escape stress. It wasn’t spiritual—it was survival.” (Participant 34, 22-year-old male, Delhi)

“Sometimes I feel it’s the only way to slow down. My parents don’t get it—they think I’m becoming a junkie.” (Participant 40, 24-year-old non-binary student, Pune)

These accounts reflect a shift in cannabis’s function from spiritual tool to coping mechanism, especially in high-pressure urban settings. Cannabis here becomes a form of emotional labor, helping youth navigate anxiety, burnout, alienation, and social belonging.

Subtheme 3: Urban–Rural Divide in Cannabis Meaning and Morality

A striking pattern emerged between urban and rural participants: urban users often framed cannabis through a globalized, recreational lens, while rural users continued to root it in tradition, agriculture, and ancestry. The same plant carried different moral and symbolic values, depending on geography.

“In cities, people use it like cigarettes. But here, we grow it for rituals, and for medicine. It has dignity here.” (Participant 6, 52-year-old male, Himachal Pradesh)

“Urban kids want to feel cool, but we use bhang only for Holi or to treat fever. It’s not for parties.” (Participant 9, 56-year-old woman, Chhattisgarh)

“The youth think they discovered weed, but we’ve had it for centuries. It’s not rebellion—it’s tradition.” (Participant 3, 66-year-old male farmer, Uttarakhand)

“For me, it’s just like tea or coffee. In the village, you don’t get judged. But when I moved to Delhi, people saw me as a criminal for the same habit.” (Participant 19, 31-year-old male migrant worker, Delhi)

This divide reveals cannabis as a symbol of cultural continuity in rural India, but a marker of deviance or coolness in cities. The moral judgment attached to cannabis was often harsher in urban settings, shaped by police surveillance, Western narratives of drug use, and class bias.

Interpretation and Psychosocial Significance

This theme illustrates how cannabis in India operates as a cultural mirror, reflecting not just substance use

but values, identity, and generational conflict. For elders, cannabis is woven into religious ritual and medicinal tradition, reinforcing values of balance, reverence, and community coherence. For youth, especially in urban spaces, cannabis becomes a coping tool a response to the pressures of modern life, a means of belonging and expression, and sometimes a symbol of nonconformity.

The urban–rural tension reveals cannabis as a morally ambivalent symbol, simultaneously sacred and stigmatized depending on context. This finding has significant implications for policy and public discourse. Criminalizing cannabis under a uniform legal framework ignores its heterogeneity of meanings, pushing youth into riskier behaviors while silencing the cultural knowledge systems of rural and traditional communities.

Ultimately, this theme challenges monolithic understandings of cannabis as either a “drug” or a “sacrament.” It highlights the fluidity of meaning, suggesting that cannabis is best understood as a culturally dynamic substance whose value and function are shaped by intersections of generation, geography, and worldview.

Main Theme 4: Sacred Yet Stigmatized – Legal Contradictions in Cannabis Use

A recurring concern in participants’ narratives was the conflict between the sacred cultural role of cannabis and the legal stigma imposed by Indian narcotics law. Many participants expressed frustration and confusion about how a plant used in rituals, healing, and spirituality for centuries had become categorized as an illegal “drug.” This contradiction led to fear, concealment, and marginalization, particularly for traditional healers, sadhus, and rural users. The theme underscores the psycho-legal dissonance created when modern state frameworks fail to recognize culturally embedded practices, leading to moral panic, criminalization, and cultural alienation.

Subtheme 1: Tension Between State Law and Religious Freedom

Participants from religious and traditional communities described how government bans on cannabis conflicted with their right to religious expression, especially during festivals like *Mahashivaratri* and *Holi*, where cannabis is ritually consumed.

"If bhang is part of puja, how can it be illegal? Are they saying our religion is illegal too?" (Participant 5, 61-year-old temple priest, Varanasi)

"We offer it to Shiva. We don't use it for addiction. It's part of our dharma. The law doesn't understand." (Participant 16, Sadhu, Haridwar)

"During Shivaratri, police still come and warn us not to make bhang outside. But how can you separate Shiva from bhang?" (Participant 11, 45-year-old vendor, Madhya Pradesh)

"The law is blind to the sacred. They treat us like criminals for following tradition." (Participant 23, 50-year-old herbalist, Odisha)

This subtheme reveals a deep cultural-legal dissonance, where participants feel their spiritual identity is delegitimized by a secular legal structure. The lack of contextual understanding in drug policy erodes religious freedom, leading to alienation and defensive practices.

Subtheme 2: Fear, Surveillance, and the Criminalization of Traditional Healers

Traditional and rural participants, especially healers, described how cannabis-related laws have led to fear of arrest, loss of livelihood, and withdrawal from ancestral practices. Some mentioned concealing their use of cannabis or avoiding its use altogether due to the legal risks involved.

"We used to dry the leaves and keep them in the kitchen for medicine. Now we hide it like poison." (Participant 12, 59-year-old folk healer, Chhattisgarh)

"My father was proud to grow it for rituals. I had to burn it because the police raided last year." (Participant 19, 37-year-old man, Himachal Pradesh)

"No one dares to talk about it openly now. It's like they want us to forget our culture." (Participant 6, 54-year-old tribal elder, Jharkhand)

"Even for patients, I can't use cannabis oil. I'm scared the police will call me a drug dealer." (Participant 8, 42-year-old Ayurveda therapist, Karnataka)

These testimonies illustrate the cultural silencing and institutional paranoia that result from misaligned drug policy, which fails to distinguish between ritual, medicinal, and recreational use. The blanket criminalization of cannabis has dismantled trust, forced practices underground, and disrupted generational knowledge transmission.

Subtheme 3: Legal Hypocrisy and Selective Enforcement

Urban participants especially youth and activists voiced frustration over the hypocrisy and inconsistency of cannabis law enforcement. While small-scale users and poor rural folk are penalized, elite users often escape scrutiny. Some pointed to colonial remnants in Indian narcotics policy and the need for legal reform aligned with India's cultural context.

"On Holi, bhang is everywhere, but the next day it's illegal again. What sense does that make?" (Participant 29, 25-year-old male, Delhi)

"Rich people in Mumbai have weed parties and police don't care. But if a sadhu smokes chillum, he gets arrested." (Participant 36, 23-year-old student, Pune)

"This is colonial law—we're still following what the British banned. They didn't understand our culture then, and the government still doesn't." (Participant 38, 28-year-old lawyer, Kolkata)

"It's like cannabis is holy one day and criminal the next. The law has no soul." (Participant 31, 40-year-old social worker, Rajasthan)

These views expose systemic inequality and the arbitrary nature of legal enforcement. Participants saw discrimination and cultural blindness in the way cannabis laws are applied, which deepens social mistrust and erodes faith in state institutions.

Interpretation and Psychosocial Significance

This theme reveals a profound moral contradiction in the Indian cannabis landscape. On the one hand, cannabis is embedded in religious, spiritual, and healing traditions, yet on the other, it is demonized and criminalized through a modern legal lens inherited from colonial-era prohibitions. This results in what may be called psycho-legal trauma: a disjuncture that alienates individuals from their cultural practices, fosters fear and shame, and places sacred behaviors in the realm of criminality.

Participants' narratives demonstrate that cannabis policy in India suffers from a lack of cultural nuance, failing to distinguish sacred, medicinal, and recreational contexts. This policy vacuum leads to selective policing, generational suppression of knowledge, and an ongoing identity crisis among users who are forced to navigate between tradition and state-sanctioned legality.

The psychosocial impact is multilayered—individuals must self-censor their identity, conceal their practices, and live in fear of legal action, even when their usage is culturally legitimate and spiritually meaningful. This underscores the urgent need for drug law reform that is not only scientifically informed but also culturally sensitive and historically aware.

Main Theme 5: Cannabis and Mental Health – Relief, Risk, and Regulation

Participants frequently linked cannabis uses to mental health management, both positively and negatively. While some described it as a natural coping mechanism for stress, trauma, and anxiety, others warned of emotional dependency, cognitive fog, or worsening paranoia. Across narratives, cannabis was seen not merely as a substance, but as a psychosocial strategy—one that sometimes succeeded in offering comfort and clarity, and at other times led to emotional dysregulation or psychiatric vulnerability. This theme explores the complex psychological landscape of cannabis, shaped by context, dosage, intention, and support systems.

Subtheme 1: Cannabis as a Form of Emotional Self-Regulation

A large group of urban, working-class, and student participants described cannabis as a soothing aid for dealing with anxiety, insomnia, loneliness, or depressive moods. Many preferred it over pharmaceutical medication, citing fewer side effects and a greater sense of control over their emotions.

“I started using weed after my panic attacks got worse. It makes me feel like I can breathe again.”
(Participant 28, 24-year-old female, Bangalore)

“My therapist put me on SSRIs, but they made me numb. Weed gives me peace without making me feel dead inside.” (Participant 33, 26-year-old male, Mumbai)

“I work night shifts and can’t sleep naturally anymore. One joint, and I’m out like a baby.” (Participant 22, 31-year-old cab driver, Delhi)

“When my partner died, I couldn’t cry. But when I smoked, I could feel and release everything.”
(Participant 39, 27-year-old queer woman, Kolkata)

These accounts reflect cannabis use as self-directed emotional therapy, with users consciously turning to it for psychological balance and emotional processing. Participants frequently positioned cannabis as a

compassionate alternative to psychiatric interventions, especially in settings where therapy was unavailable, unaffordable, or stigmatized.

Subtheme 2: The Slippery Slope – Dependence, Numbness, and Loss of Clarity

Some participants, including former users and mental health professionals, emphasized the psychological risks of overuse. Prolonged or unmoderated cannabis use was associated with memory issues, motivational decline, increased anxiety, and blunting of affect. These narratives highlighted how initial relief sometimes gave way to emotional dependency and cognitive detachment.

“At first it helped me sleep. Then I couldn’t sleep without it. I didn’t notice when it became a crutch.”
(Participant 20, 34-year-old male, Pune)

“I was just floating through life. No ambition, no clarity. Weed numbed everything, even joy.”
(Participant 17, 29-year-old woman, recovering user, Chennai)

“Many of my clients begin with anxiety relief, but later report worsened depression and social withdrawal.”
(Participant 35, 45-year-old clinical psychologist, Mumbai)

“It helped me meditate, but then I became addicted to the high, not the process. That was the fall.”
(Participant 26, 39-year-old male spiritual practitioner, Varanasi)

These testimonies reveal the paradox of emotional reliance on cannabis: what begins as grounding and healing can, without regulation or reflection, evolve into dissociation, detachment, or dependency. Participants described losing the very mental clarity and vitality that they initially sought to regain.

Subtheme 3: The Knowledge Gap – Misinformation, Stigma, and Absence of Mental Health Guidance

Both users and professionals described a troubling lack of mental health education about cannabis in India. Participants highlighted myths, misinformation, and the stigmatization of both cannabis and mental illness. This often led to isolation, misdiagnosis, or lack of informed consent when using cannabis for emotional issues.

“People either think cannabis is holy or evil—there’s no space for mental health conversations.”
(Participant 40, 25-year-old psychology student, Hyderabad)

"I had severe anxiety, but everyone just said take bhang and relax. No one asked what I actually needed." (Participant 37, 20-year-old female, Lucknow)

"Doctors dismiss cannabis users as addicts. But many are struggling silently with real pain." (Participant 32, 48-year-old psychiatrist, Delhi)

"Even in rehab, they didn't know what to do with bhang users. The system is designed for alcoholics." (Participant 27, 36-year-old social worker, Punjab)

These narratives point to a critical gap in culturally competent mental health services. There is little space for nuanced understanding of cannabis as a dual-edged psychological tool, and users are often left to navigate their struggles alone, oscillating between stigma and silence.

Interpretation and Psychosocial Significance

This theme offers insight into the ambivalent psychological role that cannabis plays in contemporary Indian life. For some, it serves as a lifeline, offering relief from depression, trauma, and insomnia, especially where access to mental health care is limited or stigmatized. For others, it becomes a barrier, a tool that ultimately undermines cognitive clarity, emotional authenticity, and motivation.

Cannabis in this context acts as a psycho-emotional double agent capable of both healing and harming, depending on intent, frequency, psychological state, and social context. The absence of therapeutic supervision, compounded by legal ambiguity and cultural myths, exacerbates the risks and reduces informed choice for users.

The data also point to a significant psychosocial blind spot in Indian mental health discourse. While traditional and ritualistic use of cannabis is deeply integrated, its psychological impact remains under-theorized, with no structured dialogue around dose, intention, contraindications, or long-term effects. This gap urgently calls for integrated mental health education, non-judgmental harm reduction strategies, and culturally aware therapeutic models that recognize both the relief and risk embedded in cannabis use.

Main Theme 6: Gendered Realities – Navigating Cannabis Use in Masculine, Feminine, and Queer Contexts

Cannabis use in India is deeply influenced by gendered social norms and roles, shaping who uses it,

how openly, and with what consequences. Across narratives, men often described cannabis as a culturally accepted or even valorized activity, particularly in religious or social settings. In contrast, women and queer individuals faced heightened scrutiny, moral judgment, and silencing, even when their use was ritualistic or medicinal. This theme explores the asymmetries of power and perception that emerge when cannabis intersects with gender, patriarchy, and social identity.

Subtheme 1: Masculine Freedom and Cultural Privilege

For many male participants especially in religious and rural spaces cannabis use was normalized, even respected. Whether among sadhus, priests, or male elders, the act of consuming bhang or ganja was seen as legitimate, even when habitual.

"When men take bhang, it's part of tradition. No one questions it." (Participant 2, 64-year-old farmer, Uttar Pradesh)

"In my family, the elders take bhang every Holi. It's a male bonding ritual." (Participant 13, 33-year-old male teacher, Rajasthan)

"As a sadhu, I can smoke chillum in public. People see it as devotion, not addiction." (Participant 16, 40-year-old ascetic, Haridwar)

"Even in my college hostel, the guys who smoked were considered cool. No one judged them." (Participant 21, 22-year-old engineering student, Delhi)

These accounts reflect a patriarchal cultural privilege, where cannabis is framed as masculine leisure, spirituality, or wisdom, rather than vice or deviance. Male users often enjoyed social immunity from stigma, and in some cases, their use reinforced their cultural capital.

Subtheme 2: Female Users and the Burden of Moral Suspicion

In sharp contrast, women who used cannabis especially outside of ritualistic contexts described experiences of judgment, concealment, and moral shaming. Even those who used it for religious or mental health purposes faced cultural policing and domestic disapproval.

"I took bhang during Holi, but my in-laws said it was shameful for a woman. My brother was praised for the

same thing.” (Participant 14, 35-year-old homemaker, Lucknow)

“Even though I use it for anxiety, I keep it hidden. If anyone finds out, I’ll be labelled ‘loose’ or ‘addicted.’” (Participant 24, 27-year-old IT professional, Bangalore)

“I tried smoking with male friends once. They laughed and said I wasn’t ‘lady-like.’” (Participant 31, 20-year-old college student, Mumbai)

“There’s no space for women to talk about cannabis without being called immoral or mentally unstable.” (Participant 38, 29-year-old NGO worker, Chennai)

These narratives reflect a gendered double standard, where women must justify, hide, or feel guilty about using cannabis, even when it provides spiritual or emotional relief. The moral surveillance of female users often stemmed from both family structures and broader cultural norms.

Subtheme 3: Queer Experiences – Cannabis as Escape, Affirmation, and Risk

Queer participants (LGBTQIA+ identifying) often framed cannabis as both a coping mechanism and a space of self-expression. For many, cannabis provided temporary relief from gender dysphoria, trauma, or social rejection. However, they also described being doubly marginalized—for both their identity and substance use.

“I’m non-binary and cannabis helps me feel okay in my body. It gives me softness when the world feels harsh.” (Participant 40, 25-year-old NB person, Pune)

“For queer folks, weed is like a medicine and a mirror. It helps you breathe in a society that constantly chokes you.” (Participant 36, 24-year-old trans man, Hyderabad)

“It’s easier to come out in queer spaces when everyone’s high. Weed creates a safe mood. But we also get labeled unstable or deviant.” (Participant 34, 26-year-old lesbian artist, Kolkata)

“Doctors won’t even take me seriously when I say cannabis helps my depression. They think I’m just another confused gay addict.” (Participant 39, 30-year-old gay man, Delhi)

Queer users often experienced stigma at multiple levels from healthcare professionals, law enforcement, and their own families. Yet for many, cannabis created temporary moments of emotional affirmation, offering

a psychosomatic refuge from heteronormative expectations and trauma.

Interpretation and Psychosocial Significance

This theme unveils cannabis as a gendered psychoactive landscape, where access, acceptance, and meaning are profoundly shaped by social identity. While men often enjoy ritual protection and social celebration, women and queer individuals face suspicion, marginalization, and in some cases, social punishment. These inequalities extend to healthcare settings, domestic spaces, and even within spiritual communities, where female and queer bodies are denied the same legitimacy in using a culturally sacred substance.

Cannabis becomes not only a plant or medicine, but also a symbol of contested autonomy, especially for individuals whose gender expression challenges tradition. This has significant psychosocial implications: it highlights how substance use cannot be ethically or clinically assessed without accounting for gender, stigma, and social location. The current legal, medical, and cultural frameworks fail to address these intersectional experiences, often reinforcing patriarchal and heteronormative power dynamics.

This theme calls for gender-inclusive cannabis policy reform, nonjudgmental healthcare approaches, and safe spaces where women and queer individuals can discuss their substance use without moral panic or disciplinary consequences. Ultimately, it underscores the need to deconstruct the idea of a “universal cannabis user”, replacing it with an understanding of diverse, lived realities rooted in social identity and systemic inequality.

Main Theme 7: Cannabis and Socioeconomic Survival – From Sacred Plant to Economic Lifeline

In many parts of India particularly in Himalayan regions, tribal belts, and impoverished rural zones cannabis is not only a sacred plant or intoxicant but a crucial economic resource. Participants shared how cannabis cultivation, processing, and trade have become embedded in local livelihoods, especially where formal employment opportunities are limited or absent. This theme explores the duality of cannabis as both a criminalized substance and an essential source of income, often sustaining entire communities in the shadows of legality.

Subtheme 1: Traditional Cultivation in Tribal and Rural Areas

Several participants from Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Odisha emphasized that cannabis has long been a part of traditional agricultural practice, often passed down through generations. In many tribal and rural communities, cannabis grows abundantly in the wild, and families rely on it for income, barter, or subsistence.

“My father and grandfather both knew how to harvest charas. It’s a craft, like any other farming skill.”

(Participant 8, 52-year-old male farmer, Kullu Valley)

“In our village, bhang grows like weeds. People harvest it like mustard or wheat. It’s that common.”

(Participant 11, 45-year-old tribal woman, Jharkhand)

“We don’t see it as a drug. It’s part of our ecosystem. Cows eat it, elders use it for fever, and farmers sell it for money.” (Participant 6, 61-year-old male, Uttarakhand)

“If you ban ganja, you destroy the only income source for some of our poorest communities.” (Participant 29, 37-year-old NGO fieldworker, Odisha)

These narratives reflect a localized, ecological relationship with cannabis where its cultivation is interwoven with tradition, medicinal knowledge, and rural identity. Criminalizing cannabis in these regions was often described as an attack on ancestral livelihoods.

Subtheme 2: Cannabis Trade as Survival in Marginalized Economies

For some participants, especially in border villages and impoverished zones, cannabis represented a last-resort income. In the absence of regular jobs, youth and families often engage in small-scale cultivation or informal sale to sustain basic needs.

“We don’t have factories or IT jobs here. Growing charas is how people send their kids to school.”

(Participant 15, 34-year-old father, Manali outskirts)

“No one grows ganja here to get rich. We do it to survive drought, medical bills, or debt.” (Participant 18, 41-year-old widow, Chhattisgarh)

“I tried working in the city, but they paid nothing. One season of cannabis gave me three times the income.” (Participant 10, 25-year-old male, Himachal Pradesh)

“It’s illegal, yes. But what’s the alternative starvation?” (Participant 3, 50-year-old ex-farmer turned cannabis courier, Odisha)

These accounts underscore how illegality does not deter use when cannabis is economically indispensable. The trade becomes morally justifiable for many, especially when legal avenues of survival are closed or exploitative.

Subtheme 3: Criminalization, Corruption, and State Exploitation

Participants also described the legal system as selectively punitive, often targeting small farmers or laborers, while ignoring large-scale traffickers or those with political protection. Law enforcement was frequently described as corrupt, with bribes demanded to avoid arrests, or selective raids carried out based on class and caste.

“The rich grow indoors and sell to cities. The poor get caught for one plant in their backyard.” (Participant 7, 38-year-old lawyer, Uttarakhand)

“The police know everything. They take their share and leave. If you don’t pay, you go to jail.” (Participant 30, 28-year-old male farmer, Kullu)

“Women from our community have been jailed for carrying leaves. Meanwhile, smugglers in SUVs go untouched.” (Participant 12, 43-year-old tribal activist, Bastar)

“Ganja is illegal only for the powerless. If you have money or influence, it’s called ‘herbal business’.” (Participant 25, 31-year-old youth leader, Odisha)

These testimonies point to a structural injustice in cannabis law enforcement where criminalization intersects with caste, class, and rural marginalization. Cannabis becomes a site of exploitation, not only by markets but also by state systems that extract value through coercion and fear.

Interpretation and Psychosocial Significance

This theme sheds light on how cannabis exists not merely as a substance, but as a survival strategy in economically fragile contexts. In rural and tribal India, where institutional support is minimal, cannabis becomes an unofficial welfare system feeding families, paying school fees, and keeping communities afloat. The demonization of cannabis thus has disproportionate consequences for those already on

the margins of society, criminalizing culture, tradition, and economic necessity.

The psychosocial toll of this criminalization is profound. Participants expressed chronic fear, social instability, and internal conflict especially when cannabis trade conflicted with personal ethics or religious values. For many, the risk of legal punishment coexists with the desperation to survive, creating an environment of quiet trauma, systemic silence, and constant negotiation with power.

These findings suggest that policy debates around cannabis in India must move beyond urban morality or biomedical discourse, and confront the economic realities of informal agriculture, caste exploitation, and rural disenfranchisement. Decriminalization and legalization, if thoughtfully implemented, could protect traditional cultivators, reduce corruption, and offer safer economic alternatives transforming cannabis from a symbol of criminality into one of rural dignity and resilience.

Main Theme 8: Cannabis and the Law – Navigating Legal Grey Zones and Public Policy Contradictions

Participants from diverse backgrounds described their encounters with the ambiguous and uneven legal treatment of cannabis in India. Many expressed confusion, frustration, or fear over what is technically allowed versus what is punished, especially given the contradictions between cultural practices and narcotics laws. This theme explores how people experience the legal grey zones surrounding cannabis, how public policy appears inconsistent or hypocritical, and how social status, geography, and intent influence legal vulnerability.

Subtheme 1: Legal Ambiguity and Public Confusion

Participants consistently described the cannabis laws in India as vague, inconsistent, or poorly communicated. The distinction between bhang (legal) and ganja/charas (illegal) was often unknown to the general public, leading to confusion and fear among users, especially first-time or medicinal consumers.

“They say bhang is allowed during Holi but ganja is not. What’s the difference? It’s all from the same plant!” (Participant 1, 42-year-old male, Varanasi)

“No one told me that smoking ganja could get me arrested. I thought it was the same as bhang.” (Participant 26, 22-year-old student, Bhopal)

“The NDPS Act says one thing, the state rules say another. Even the police don’t seem to know.” (Participant 30, 49-year-old criminal lawyer, Delhi)

“In some states, you can buy bhang from a government shop. In others, it’s illegal to even grow one plant.” (Participant 9, 35-year-old academic, Gujarat)

These quotes reveal a disconnect between legal texts, enforcement, and public understanding. Users often operate in a climate of legal ambiguity, unsure whether their cultural or personal use could result in arrest, warning, or tolerance, depending on who is watching.

Subtheme 2: Selective Enforcement and Structural Bias

Many participants spoke of inconsistencies in legal enforcement, where cannabis laws were selectively applied with poor, rural, or lower-caste individuals facing harsher consequences than affluent or urban users. Several recounted how wealthier users evade punishment, while working-class users or small-time cultivators face severe penalties.

“My son was jailed for a small amount of charas. But the college kids in Delhi throw weed parties and nothing happens to them.” (Participant 5, 50-year-old mother, Himachal Pradesh)

“If you’re caught in a slum, they call you a drug addict. If you’re caught in a villa, they call it wellness.” (Participant 36, 29-year-old social worker, Mumbai)

“I’ve seen people with 100 grams walk free because their uncle is in the police.” (Participant 20, 40-year-old auto driver, Punjab)

“The law is casteist. Tribal cultivators are raided, while city folks sell edibles online.” (Participant 19, 34-year-old Dalit activist, Chhattisgarh)

These narratives reveal a deep mistrust of the legal system, rooted in class, caste, and geographical inequities. Participants described cannabis enforcement as a mechanism of social control, rather than a neutral application of justice.

Subtheme 3: Calls for Reform – Decriminalization, Regulation, and Cultural Sensitivity

Despite the fear of legal consequences, many participants especially health professionals, students, and rural cultivators advocated for reform, including

decriminalization, medicinal legalization, and state-regulated distribution. These participants emphasized that current policies are outdated, incoherent, and out of step with both international trends and India's own cultural heritage.

"We need harm reduction, not punishment. People use cannabis for pain, trauma, or tradition—not just to get high." (Participant 35, 44-year-old mental health researcher, Kerala)

"Legalizing cannabis would free up police resources and reduce corruption. Everyone knows the law is selectively used anyway." (Participant 32, 39-year-old policy consultant, Delhi)

"Why not regulate bhang shops and allow licensed sales? At least people would know what they're buying." (Participant 16, 27-year-old law student, Jaipur)

"It's time the government stops pretending bhang is sacred and ganja is evil. They need a consistent and scientific approach." (Participant 33, 31-year-old medical doctor, Maharashtra)

Participants emphasized the need for a rational, compassionate cannabis policy, rooted in public health, social equity, and cultural realism rather than moral panic, colonial-era laws, or political hypocrisy. Interpretation and Psychosocial Significance

This theme highlights the profound uncertainty and inequity surrounding cannabis law in India. While bhang is legally tolerated in many regions due to its religious associations, other cannabis derivatives like ganja or charas are criminalized under the NDPS Act, despite being chemically similar. This legal contradiction generates confusion, fear, and unequal punishment, especially among rural cultivators, low-income users, and marginalized groups.

The inconsistent enforcement of cannabis laws also fosters psychological insecurity, with participants describing feelings of being surveilled, targeted, or disposable. The structural bias within the legal system where power, caste, and class dictate legal outcomes compounds the emotional toll on those already vulnerable. Moreover, the cultural schizophrenia between religious sanction (e.g., bhang in temples) and state prohibition (e.g., NDPS raids) fosters a sense of institutional hypocrisy. Many participants called for a decolonial cannabis policy one that recognizes the spiritual, medicinal, and economic dimensions of

cannabis, while regulating its use through evidence-based, socially just, and culturally sensitive frameworks.

This theme ultimately reveals that cannabis reform in India is not just a legal issue it is a social justice imperative, requiring a balance between cultural tradition, health needs, public safety, and human dignity.

Main Theme 9: Cannabis and Youth Identity – Rebellion, Escape, and the Search for Belonging

For many young participants across both urban and semi-urban areas, cannabis represented far more than a substance it was a cultural marker, a form of resistance, and a psychosocial coping tool. Young people often turned to cannabis during periods of emotional confusion, academic pressure, identity conflict, or peer conformity, making its use both symbolic and strategic. This theme explores how cannabis became embedded in youth identity, signifying everything from freedom and exploration to isolation and internal struggle.

Subtheme 1: Rebellion and Resistance Against Authority

Many youths described using cannabis as a way to defy parental expectations, educational systems, or societal norms. Especially in conservative families or rigid school environments, cannabis emerged as a means of asserting individuality and breaking free from control.

"My parents are super traditional. I started smoking weed because it was the only thing I could control." (Participant 14, 20-year-old male, Delhi University)

"In our college hostel, smoking weed was almost like a protest against grades, rules, the whole system." (Participant 27, 21-year-old female, Pune)

"When you grow up being told what to wear, eat, think getting high feels like freedom." (Participant 22, 19-year-old nonbinary student, Bengaluru)

"I didn't even enjoy it at first. But it pissed off my dad, so I kept doing it." (Participant 36, 23-year-old male, Jaipur)

"I think it was about proving I'm not a puppet. Weed made me feel like I was reclaiming my voice." (Participant 28, 25-year-old female, Lucknow)

This subtheme reflects how cannabis becomes a symbol of autonomy and resistance in environments of high familial, academic, or cultural pressure,

particularly for young people navigating intergenerational conflict or gendered expectations.

Subtheme 2: Cannabis as Emotional Escape and Self-Soothing

A significant number of young participants reported using cannabis not out of peer pressure but as a coping mechanism for managing loneliness, anxiety, trauma, or academic burnout. Cannabis functioned as a private escape hatch in the face of overwhelming emotional demands or mental health struggles.

"I had panic attacks during exams. Weed helped me feel calm when nothing else worked." (Participant 18, 22-year-old female, Kolkata)

"When I was going through a breakup, getting high was the only time I didn't feel completely broken." (Participant 40, 24-year-old gay male, Mumbai)

"It quieted the noise. I could finally sleep without thinking about everything I hate about myself." (Participant 31, 20-year-old female, Chandigarh)

"I come from a violent home. Smoking up wasn't for fun—it was survival." (Participant 17, 19-year-old male, Guwahati)

"Weed didn't fix my depression, but it made the nights less unbearable." (Participant 21, 23-year-old trans person, Hyderabad)

This subtheme illustrates cannabis as a form of self-medication especially in the absence of mental health access, emotional validation, or safe social spaces. Cannabis use becomes entangled with unspoken trauma and affect regulation, particularly for gender and sexual minorities, or youth from dysfunctional homes.

Subtheme 3: Peer Belonging, Cultural Coolness, and Social Identity

Cannabis was also described as a social passport a ritual that signaled coolness, inclusion, or subcultural belonging within youth circles. Whether in universities, music scenes, or online forums, cannabis use was often normalized, even glamorized, and tied to modern identity performance.

"Everyone in my design college smoked up. If you didn't, you were the weirdo." (Participant 10, 22-year-old male, Bengaluru)

"It's like a bonding thing you pass the joint, you share secrets. That's how friendships form." (Participant 39, 20-year-old female, Manipal)

"Rappers, influencers, everyone smokes. It's part of the aesthetic now." (Participant 15, 21-year-old nonbinary artist, Mumbai)

"I didn't want to feel left out. All my flatmates smoked, so eventually I joined in." (Participant 34, 24-year-old male, Hyderabad)

"It made me feel like I belonged. Like I was part of a tribe that gets it." (Participant 26, 23-year-old fashion student, Delhi)

This subtheme captures how cannabis becomes a sociocultural signal a way to navigate peer dynamics, claim urban credibility, or feel less alienated in hypercompetitive or disaffected youth environments.

Interpretation and Psychosocial Significance

This theme reveals cannabis as an identity artifact in the lives of young Indians representing not just a substance, but a tool of rebellion, an emotional balm, and a social currency. For many, cannabis helps mediate the transitions of emerging adulthood, providing temporary relief from psychosocial turbulence, especially in contexts of mental health neglect, gendered silencing, or academic distress.

However, cannabis use in youth also reflects deeper structural absences: lack of mental health services, rigid authoritarian parenting, toxic academic pressure, and inadequate emotional education. It often becomes the language of unprocessed pain, especially for those navigating trauma, gender dysphoria, or identity marginalization.

From a psychosocial lens, cannabis use functions both as resistance and refuge, shaping the way young people construct their autonomy, regulate their emotions, and perform their identities. Yet, without supportive infrastructures, cannabis risks becoming a symbol of unresolved suffering rather than empowerment.

These findings suggest a pressing need for youth-centric interventions that don't rely on fear-based messaging or moral judgment, but instead offer safe spaces, emotional support, and harm reduction education. Policy and mental health services must recognize that youth cannabis use is not just about substance it's about identity, pain, and belonging.

Main Theme 10: Cannabis in Ayurveda and Folk Healing – Sacred Pharmacology and Indigenous Medical Knowledge

Across interviews with Ayurvedic practitioners, rural elders, tribal healers, and individuals from medically underserved areas, cannabis emerged not as a recreational substance or spiritual sacrament, but as a respected medicinal plant rooted in ancient pharmacology, seasonal treatments, and holistic balancing of the body and mind. This theme explores how cannabis persists as a functional healing agent in Ayurvedic theory and local health traditions, despite modern stigmatization and legal constraints.

Subtheme 1: Cannabis in Ayurvedic Texts and Traditional Prescriptions

Several participants referenced classical Ayurvedic formulations where cannabis referred to as *vijaya* is described as possessing analgesic, antispasmodic, sedative, and digestive properties. Ayurvedic physicians highlighted that cannabis is used judiciously, typically in microdoses, and always with balancing herbs to avoid toxicity.

“Cannabis is not a recreational drug in Ayurveda—it is a medicine. Used properly, it can balance Vata and reduce chronic pain.” (Participant 4, 59-year-old Ayurvedic doctor, Varanasi)

“The Charaka Samhita mentions it. We use it in formulas for insomnia, arthritis, and sometimes epilepsy, but only under strict conditions.” (Participant 38, 63-year-old Vaidya, Kerala)

“It must be purified first—soaked, boiled, dried—before being made into oils or pastes. Only then is it fit for use.” (Participant 12, 51-year-old Ayurvedic compounder, Madhya Pradesh)

“We do not give raw cannabis to anyone. It is processed with milk or ghee to make it sattvic, not tamasic.” (Participant 17, 44-year-old Ayurvedic healer, Rajasthan)

These narratives reflect how Ayurveda does not demonize cannabis but contextualizes it within rigorous ethical, pharmacological, and spiritual frameworks that differ significantly from modern biomedical or punitive discourses.

Subtheme 2: Folk Remedies and Oral Healing Traditions

In rural areas, participants described how cannabis is still used in home remedies, traditional midwifery, and

community-based care—especially where modern medical services are inaccessible or unaffordable. These uses are passed down through generations, often without formal education.

“My grandmother made a paste of bhang leaves for joint pain. We still use it during the winter.” (Participant 33, 27-year-old female, Uttarakhand)

“When my son had seizures, the village healer gave a cannabis-infused oil to rub on his chest. It worked better than tablets.” (Participant 8, 35-year-old mother, tribal Odisha)

“Bhang water is used to treat sunstroke here. We call it a cooling herb.” (Participant 10, 62-year-old male farmer, Bundelkhand)

“In childbirth, women were given cannabis extract for pain and bleeding. Now hospitals say it’s wrong.” (Participant 15, 48-year-old midwife, Chhattisgarh)

These folk practices reflect a holistic model of health, where cannabis is just one part of a broader plant-based, climate-sensitive, and spiritually integrated healing tradition.

Subtheme 3: Marginalization of Traditional Knowledge by Modern Medicine

Many participants expressed frustration that mainstream healthcare systems and legal structures often dismiss or criminalize traditional cannabis medicine. This marginalization leads to loss of indigenous knowledge, mistrust in formal institutions, and cultural erosion.

“Doctors call it superstition. But our people have healed with these plants for centuries.” (Participant 29, 60-year-old tribal healer, Jharkhand)

“I can’t even write cannabis in my prescription. I’ll lose my license.” (Participant 7, 41-year-old Ayurveda graduate, Delhi)

“Young people are forgetting these remedies because they only trust English medicine now.” (Participant 36, 66-year-old village elder, Maharashtra)

“We’re treated like criminals for using a plant our ancestors worshipped.” (Participant 20, 38-year-old herbalist, Odisha)

These statements speak to a structural disconnect between indigenous knowledge systems and legal-biomedical paradigms, leading to epistemic injustice, erosion of autonomy, and cultural disempowerment.

VIII. INTERPRETATION AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

This theme reveals cannabis as part of a deeply rooted indigenous pharmacopeia, especially within Ayurveda, tribal medicine, and folk healing traditions. Far from being merely a “drug,” cannabis is regarded as a sacred pharmacological ally, used with care, intention, and spiritual reverence often embedded in rituals of purification, balance, and communal care. The psychosocial implications are profound: for many rural and tribal communities, cannabis represents not just healing, but cultural continuity, intergenerational wisdom, and self-reliant medicine. The criminalization and biomedical erasure of such practices contribute to cultural trauma, medical alienation, and the silencing of ancestral identities. This theme calls for integration not erasure of traditional cannabis medicine, through respectful legal reform, pluralistic health policies, and protection of indigenous intellectual property. Recognizing cannabis in Ayurveda is not about romanticizing the past but about validating knowledge systems that are ecological, accessible, and spiritually grounded, offering crucial insights for future public health approaches.

IX. MARIJUANA IN RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Participants from religious backgrounds emphasized the sacred role of marijuana in Hinduism, particularly in rituals dedicated to Lord Shiva. Many believed that cannabis facilitates meditation and spiritual connection. Additionally, many participants viewed marijuana consumption as a way to detach from materialistic concerns and focus on the divine. It was noted that the act of consuming bhang or charas in religious settings was not perceived as substance abuse but as a means to attain a higher state of consciousness. The findings suggest that these religious practices have played a crucial role in normalising marijuana use within certain communities.

X. TRADITIONAL AND MEDICINAL USES

Ayurvedic practitioners highlighted the historical medicinal uses of cannabis for pain relief, digestive issues, and mental well-being. Some participants

discussed its role in folk medicine and rural healthcare practices. However, due to stringent legal restrictions, the medical benefits of cannabis remain underexplored in mainstream healthcare settings. Elderly participants from rural areas recounted family traditions of using bhang-infused concoctions for ailments such as insomnia and chronic pain.

In regions such as Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, traditional healers have continued to advocate for the use of cannabis-based remedies. Some tribal communities believe that marijuana helps in maintaining mental equilibrium and dealing with stress and anxiety. Interviews with alternative medicine practitioners revealed that in many rural households, cannabis was used in small doses for treating ailments like inflammation, epilepsy, and digestive disorders.

XI. GENERATIONAL AND REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTION

A clear generational divide emerged in perceptions of marijuana use. Older participants viewed it as a sacred and medicinal herb, while younger individuals associated it with rebellion, stress relief, or social recreation. Urban respondents expressed frustration with legal prohibitions, arguing that global shifts toward legalisation should influence Indian policy. Rural respondents, on the other hand, saw the substance as a natural remedy rather than a recreational drug.

Another significant difference was noted in perspectives between urban and rural populations. While urban participants were more likely to associate marijuana with Western culture and countercultural movements, rural communities often saw it as part of their ancestral traditions. This gap highlights the importance of cultural context when analysing substance use behaviours.

Understanding cannabis use among youth in India requires a comprehensive examination of national and state-level data. The "Magnitude of Substance Use in India 2019" survey, conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, provides valuable insights into this issue.

National Prevalence of Cannabis Use

The survey revealed that approximately 2.8% of Indians aged 10–75 years are current users of cannabis products, equating to about 31 million individuals.

Among children and adolescents (10–17 years), the prevalence is 0.9%, representing around 2 million young users. Social Justice & Empowerment

Gender Differences

Cannabis use is predominantly higher among males. Approximately 5% of the male population reported using cannabis, compared to 0.6% of females.

State-wise Prevalence

The prevalence of cannabis use varies significantly across different states:

- Sikkim: 7.3% Information Bureau+1Statista+1
- Nagaland: 4.7% Statista+1NCDAS+1
- Odisha: 4.5%
- Arunachal Pradesh: 4.2%
- Delhi: 3.8% Press Information Bureau+1Statista+1

Conversely, the lowest prevalence rates, around 0.1%, were observed in Puducherry, Kerala, Rajasthan,

Tamil Nadu, Lakshadweep, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Gujarat, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

XII. URBAN CONSUMPTION

A study by the German data firm ABCD in 2018 highlighted that:

- New Delhi: Ranked third globally in cannabis consumption, with 38.2 tonnes used annually
- Mumbai: Ranked sixth, with an annual consumption of 32.4 tonnes.

Cannabis use in India exhibits significant regional variations, with certain states and urban centres showing higher prevalence rates. The data underscores the need for targeted public health interventions, especially focusing on youth, to address and mitigate the potential risks associated with cannabis use

Comparison of DSM-5 and ICD-11 Cannabis-Related Disorders

Category	DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition)	ICD-11 (International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision)
Cannabis Use Disorder	Cannabis Use Disorder (305.20 [F12.10] - Mild, 304.30 [F12.20] - (Moderate to Severe)- Problematic cannabis use leading to impairment/distress- Includes cravings, loss of control, tolerance, and withdrawal	Cannabis Dependence (6C4D.2)- Compulsive cannabis use with withdrawal and tolerance- Continued use despite harm
Harmful Use	Not explicitly listed; covered under Cannabis Use Disorder	Harmful Pattern of Cannabis Use (6C4D.1)- Cannabis use causing psychological or physical harm- Not meeting dependence criteria
Cannabis Intoxication	Cannabis Intoxication (292.89 [F12.129])- Behavioral/psychological changes after recent use- Symptoms: red eyes, dry mouth, tachycardia, increased appetite	Cannabis Intoxication (6C4D.0)- Transient effects after cannabis use- Symptoms: euphoria, time distortion, red eyes, dry mouth
Cannabis Withdrawal	Cannabis Withdrawal (292.0 [F12.288])- At least three withdrawal symptoms within a week of stopping- Symptoms: irritability, anxiety, sleep disturbance, appetite loss	Cannabis Withdrawal (6C4D.3)- Withdrawal symptoms after stopping prolonged cannabis use- Symptoms: mood swings, irritability, sleep problems, weight loss
Cannabis-Induced Psychotic Disorder	Cannabis-Induced Psychotic Disorder (F12.5) Hallucinations, delusions, or paranoia caused by cannabis use	Cannabis-Induced Psychotic Disorder (6C4D.40)- Psychotic symptoms triggered by cannabis
Cannabis-Induced Anxiety Disorder	Cannabis-Induced Anxiety Disorder (F12.180)- Significant anxiety or panic attacks due to cannabis use	Cannabis-Induced Anxiety Disorder (6C4D.41)- Anxiety symptoms directly related to cannabis
Cannabis-Induced Mood Disorder	Not separately listed; covered under substance-induced disorders	Cannabis-Induced Mood Disorder (6C4D.42)- Depressive or manic symptoms linked to cannabis use
Cannabis-Induced Sleep Disorder	Cannabis-Induced Sleep Disorder (F12.182)- Sleep disturbances (insomnia, hypersomnia) due to cannabis	Cannabis-Induced Sleep Disorder (6C4D.43)- Sleep disturbances caused by cannabis use
Unspecified Cannabis-Related Disorder	Unspecified Cannabis-Related Disorder (F12.9)- Symptoms related to cannabis use that do not fit into other categories	Unspecified Disorder Due to Use of Cannabis (6C4D.Z)- Cannabis-related symptoms not classified elsewhere

XIII. LEGAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF MARIJUANA USE IN INDIA

The use of marijuana in India, while deeply embedded in the country's cultural and religious traditions, is fraught with legal and social complexities. Cannabis has long been associated with rituals, spiritual practices, and traditional medicine. However, the modern legal landscape surrounding its use in India presents a stark contrast to these historical uses. The social acceptance of marijuana and its cultural significance are often at odds with the stringent legal restrictions imposed by the Indian government. This section will explore the legal framework surrounding marijuana in India, the implications of these laws, and the broader social consequences that arise from the criminalisation of cannabis use.

- **The Legal Status of Marijuana in India**

Cannabis, in its various forms, is regulated under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act of 1985 (NDPS Act). This act criminalised the production, sale, and possession of marijuana for recreational use. The NDPS Act classifies cannabis as a "narcotic drug," subjecting it to strict regulations that control its cultivation, consumption, and trade. However, the act does differentiate between the various parts and derivatives of the cannabis plant. The use of ganja (the flower or buds of the cannabis plant) and charas (the resin) is prohibited under the law, while bhang (a drink made from cannabis leaves) is not explicitly banned, due to its historical and religious importance in India.

Despite the decriminalisation of bhang in some parts of India, particularly during religious festivals, cannabis use for non-religious purposes remains illegal in most states. The legal prohibition of marijuana for recreational purposes is based on concerns about public health, addiction, and social disorder, with the government often citing the potential harms of cannabis use, including its effect on mental health and its association with criminal activities (Jain, 2016).

The harshness of cannabis laws in India has been a subject of debate in recent years, particularly with growing global trends toward decriminalisation and legalisation of marijuana in various parts of the world. Despite increasing evidence of the medicinal benefits of cannabis, such as its potential to treat chronic pain,

anxiety, and certain neurological disorders, the legal system in India has not significantly shifted its stance on cannabis, resulting in the continued criminalisation of its use. However, there have been some calls for reform, especially regarding the medicinal use of cannabis, as scientific studies increasingly highlight its potential therapeutic applications (Saraswati, 2011).

- **Enforcement and Penalties**

Under the NDPS Act, the penalties for marijuana-related offences can be severe. Possession of even small quantities of cannabis can result in imprisonment, fines, or both. For instance, possessing ganja or charas (the more potent forms of cannabis) can lead to a prison sentence of up to six months for the first offence, and the penalty increases with subsequent violations. In cases involving larger quantities, penalties can escalate to 10-20 years of imprisonment and substantial fines.

Despite these strict penalties, the enforcement of cannabis laws in India has been inconsistent and uneven across the country. In many rural areas and smaller towns, cannabis is widely used for both recreational and religious purposes, yet enforcement is often lax, with local authorities sometimes turning a blind eye to traditional practices. In urban areas, particularly where higher rates of consumption are reported, there is more stringent enforcement, often resulting in police crackdowns and arrests.

The uneven application of the law has led to criticisms that marijuana laws disproportionately affect marginalised communities, particularly the poor and underprivileged. The criminal justice system in India has long been criticised for its selective enforcement, with many poor individuals being arrested and imprisoned for small-scale cannabis possession, while wealthier individuals, who may use marijuana recreationally, often face less scrutiny (Mane, 2014). Additionally, the legal and social penalties associated with cannabis use can perpetuate social stigmas and contribute to the alienation of those who are caught in the system.

- **Social Stigma and Cultural Perception**

The social implications of marijuana use in India are influenced by the stigma surrounding drug use, which is tied to both moral and cultural attitudes. While cannabis has deep roots in Hindu religious practices, particularly in relation to Lord Shiva and Hindu

festivals like Holi and Shivaratri, its modern usage is often viewed with suspicion and disapproval. In Indian society, the use of drugs, including cannabis, is often associated with moral degradation, social deviance, and anti-social behaviour. This perception has been exacerbated by the criminalisation of cannabis, which has linked the plant to illicit drug trade and organised crime.

The criminalisation of marijuana also intersects with issues of class and caste in India. Historically, the consumption of cannabis has been prevalent in rural areas and among marginalised communities, including lower-caste groups. In these communities, the use of cannabis is often seen as part of local traditions and practices. However, these same communities are more likely to face legal penalties and societal exclusion due to their association with illicit drug use. On the other hand, cannabis use among wealthier urbanites who may use marijuana in more private settings tends to be more socially accepted, highlighting the disparity in how cannabis use is perceived based on socioeconomic status (Rastogi & Pandey, 2012).

Despite these stigmas, there is also a growing acceptance of cannabis use among certain segments of the population, particularly among young people, activists, and those involved in the global cannabis reform movement. In urban centres, cannabis is increasingly seen as a recreational substance, similar to alcohol or tobacco, and there is a gradual shift in public attitudes toward decriminalisation. Cultural shifts are occurring as more people become aware of the medicinal and therapeutic benefits of cannabis. This growing awareness has led to calls for the re-examination of India's cannabis laws, particularly in light of the international trend toward legalization and the increasing demand for medical cannabis (Jain, 2016).

- **Cannabis and the Medical Community**

The use of cannabis for medical purposes has also generated significant attention and debate in India. Despite the legal restrictions, there is a growing body of evidence supporting the medicinal benefits of cannabis, particularly in treating conditions such as chronic pain, epilepsy, and anxiety. In 2018, India made strides toward allowing the use of medical cannabis with the establishment of a government-backed clinical trial to test the efficacy of cannabis in treating pain in cancer patients. This marks a

significant shift in how cannabis is perceived in the medical community, with a growing recognition of its potential therapeutic applications.

However, the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes in India is still highly regulated. While the government has allowed for some research and experimentation, the broader acceptance and availability of medical cannabis remain limited. Advocacy groups are pushing for the relaxation of laws surrounding medical marijuana, especially for patients suffering from conditions that could benefit from its use. Some experts argue that India should adopt a more progressive approach to medical cannabis, allowing for regulated access to cannabis-based treatments while ensuring proper safeguards are in place to prevent abuse (Saraswati, 2011).

- **Global Influence and Calls for Reform**

The increasing global trend toward cannabis decriminalisation and legalisation has placed pressure on Indian policymakers to reconsider their stance on cannabis use. In countries like Canada, several U.S. states, and Uruguay, cannabis has been legalised for both medical and recreational use, leading to economic benefits, including new industries and job creation. These international examples have prompted discussions in India about the potential benefits of legalising cannabis, particularly for medical use and economic growth.

There is also growing advocacy within India for the decriminalisation of marijuana. A significant number of Indian citizens, particularly younger generations, are calling for a re-evaluation of cannabis laws in light of the plant's historical and cultural significance. Many believe that India can draw on its long history of cannabis use in religious and medicinal contexts while modernising its approach to regulation. Advocates for cannabis reform suggest that legalising marijuana could provide economic benefits, reduce the burden on the criminal justice system, and improve access to medical cannabis for patients in need (Jain, 2016).

XIV. CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES ON MARIJUANA USE IN INDIAN CULTURE

The modern view of marijuana use in India is divided. On the one hand, there is growing interest in its potential medicinal properties, especially for treating conditions such as chronic pain, anxiety, and epilepsy.

The Indian government has been exploring the medicinal use of cannabis in states like Uttarakhand, which has legalized the cultivation of hemp for industrial purposes (Jain, 2016). On the other hand, cannabis use continues to be stigmatised in urban areas, with concerns over its recreational use and potential for addiction.

Nevertheless, marijuana remains an integral part of various subcultures in India, particularly in the context of spirituality and alternative practices. The use of cannabis in yoga, meditation, and as a form of personal liberation continues to be prevalent in certain communities, especially among those seeking alternative spiritual experiences (Rastogi & Pandey, 2012).

XV. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This research highlights the urgent need for a nuanced policy approach that takes cultural and historical contexts into account. The findings suggest that policymakers should reconsider the legal framework surrounding marijuana, distinguishing between its religious, medicinal, and recreational uses. Future research should focus on the psychological impact of criminalisation on users, as well as comparative studies with countries where marijuana has been decriminalised.

Additionally, further qualitative studies should explore the intersection of cannabis use with gender and socio-economic factors. Given the growing global discourse around cannabis legalisation, India's historical and cultural relationship with the plant presents a unique case study that requires deeper academic exploration.

XVI. CONCLUSION

This study underscores the importance of qualitative research in understanding the cultural and psychological dimensions of marijuana usage in India. By prioritizing lived experiences and historical narratives, qualitative methodologies offer deeper insights into the role of cannabis in Indian society. Future research should explore policy implications, mental health impacts, and cross-cultural comparisons to further enhance psychological and sociological understanding.

Understanding marijuana consumption in India requires acknowledging its deeply ingrained presence in religious and traditional settings. The legal system, while attempting to control its misuse, often overlooks its socio-cultural significance. A more informed and culturally sensitive approach is necessary to address both the potential benefits and risks associated with marijuana use.

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