

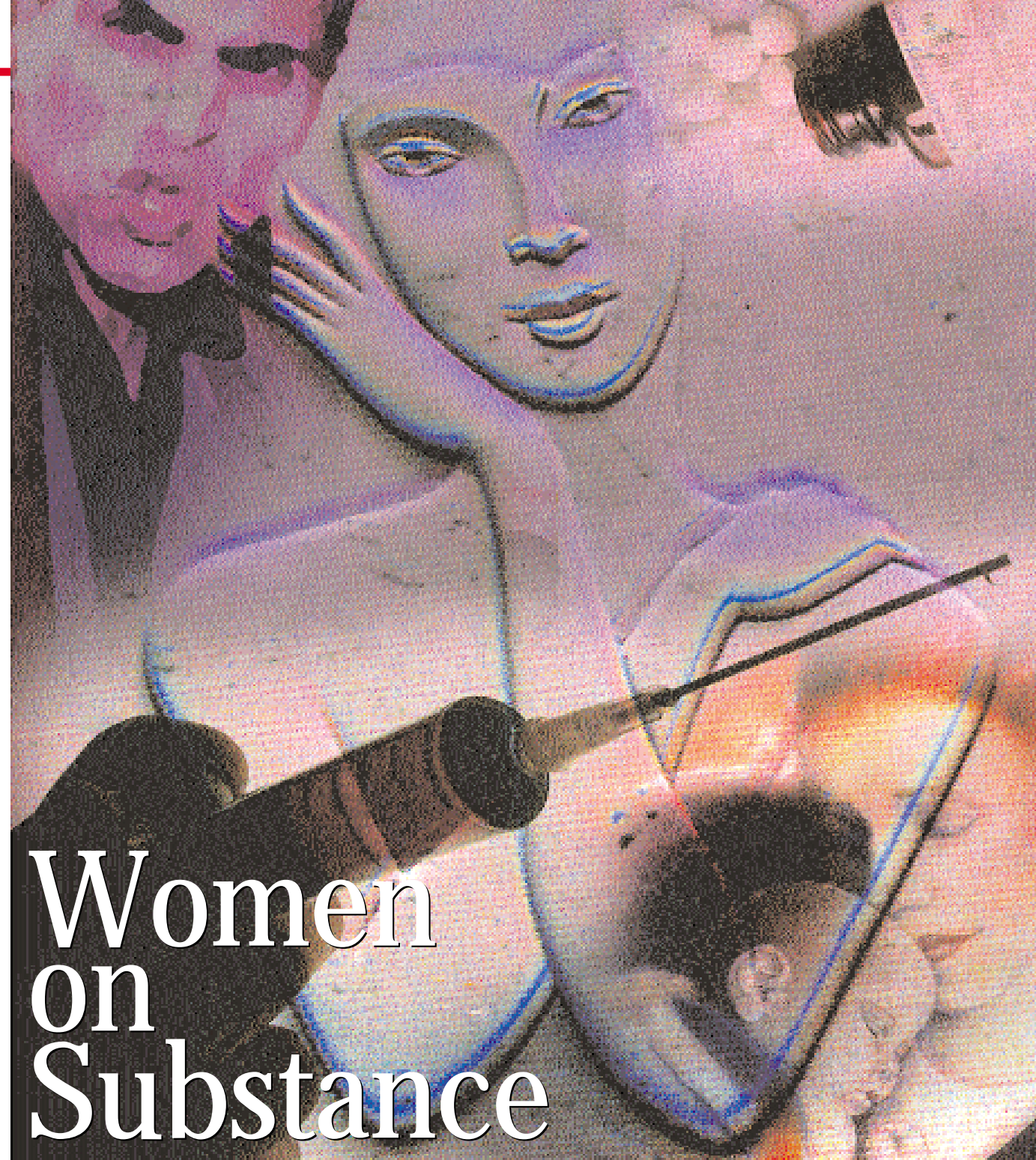
New studies on substance abuse among women convey a scary message: drug abuse among women is no longer a fringe issue

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

THE SENSATIONAL BUST of big-time cocaine-seller Ali and businessman Neeraj Wadhwa in Delhi last year may have exposed the city's social underbelly. But the most startling revelation was the number of coke-snorting women who figured among Ali's rich clients. However, the case did nothing to dispel the widely held notion that women hooked to drugs belonged to two extreme ends of the social scale. One, a battered slum dweller or a humiliated sex worker for whom drug addiction means survival. The other, a rich, high society woman who copes with the "pressures of a demanding life" by taking drugs.

The glaring omission in the guesstimates was the number of educated, working, middle-class women hooked to drugs. Now, there are definite indicators based on recent trends. Two new studies released last week by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) and the South Asia regional office of the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) as part of a national survey on drug abuse in India, bust the myths around "the type of women who take drugs". The theme is academic but the message is clear and alarming—drug abuse among women is not a fringe issue anymore.

A Rapid Assessment Study conducted in nine urban areas as part of the UNDCP project reveals that younger, educated women are more prone to drugs, unsafe injecting methods and sexual practices. One of the findings was that a large number of female drug users were single: 75 per cent in Hyderabad, 60 per cent in Thiruvananthapuram and 75 per cent in Goa. The respondents from Goa were also highly educated (37 per cent were graduates). What may finally force one to look beyond cliched reasons for drug use is that taking drugs purely for pleasure was one of the reasons women cited for their addiction. The other study was conducted by Dr Pratima Murthy, associate professor of psychiatry at NIMHANS, Bangalore.



Women on Substance

Digital illustration by RAVI SHANKAR

"The notion that women take drugs only because of stress is no longer the single, undisputed truth," she says, warning that the study figures should not be used to make generalisations about Indian society. However, she does agree that "drug abuse is becoming popular in the urban middle classes, especially among those who represent India's phase of transition".

It is also not just the snort of cocaine or the high of heroin that drives women, say mental health professionals. Abuse of prescription drugs from the benzodiazepine group like Alprax, Calmpose, Valium, Trika, Restill, Placedox and Alzolam is a growing trend. Natasha Singh—the Delhi-based socialite who reportedly consumed a heavy dose of Alprax on a

regular basis and died after a fall from a hotel in March this year—obviously wasn't a solitary example. "I see four to six cases every day involving either dependence on sedatives or abuse," says Delhi-based psychiatrist Sanjay Chugh, who thinks escapism is an inescapable urge among urban drug users. Take Namita. At 1.30 in the morning, just after a party, she

realised she had run out of Calmpose. From a smart, amiable hostess in capris and figure-hugging top, Namita turned into an agitated woman who "wanted" Calmpose at any cost. "I take it when I can't sleep, when I'm tense, even when I want to have sex. Sometimes, I take it in the middle of a tension-spiked working day as well. I just can't do without it," she says.

Murthy's study covered Delhi, Mumbai and Aizawl and the findings of women on drugs fit the new profile. While the maximum number of women are hooked to brown sugar (see box), other preferred drugs are narcotic analgesics, tranquillisers, alcohol, cough syrups and cannabis. A fact reflected often in the newsmaking trends of Delhi. In Murthy's study, however, it was in the Manipur capital of Aizawl that narcotic analgesics were the most preferred. According to a Mumbai-based psychotherapist, cocaine is favoured in the city as compared to prescription drugs or sedative painkillers. "Cocaine reflects status as it is an expensive party drug and women are not sucked into judgmental traps by others in their groups because everybody is using it," she says.

While most of the reasons behind women taking to drugs now mirror those of men, everyday life as a drug user or the journey into rehab and back to sobriety is lonelier and tougher for women. Sushma Bhatia*, a 37-year-old educated Delhi housewife, is an alcoholic and a drug addict with two kids and an alcoholic husband. Sharing her experiences in a women's chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Bhatia says her life as an alcoholic is far more devastating in terms of emotional and social consequences than a man's. Bhatia took to alcohol seven years ago when one day "I was feeling completely rotten about myself and the way my husband behaved with me after he got drunk". She experimented with cocaine as well. Soon, she would start drinking after sending her kids to school. One day, after a near-nervous breakdown, she collapsed and had to be carried to a rehab centre.

For 43-year-old Banita Muralidha-

ran*, a corporate executive, the problem was only alcoholism. She was asked to quit on "grounds of indecent behaviour". Muralidharan, who is single, says her friends deserted her, making the urge to kick the addiction very difficult.

"Female addicts are seen as doubly deviant," explains Sheigla Murphy, director of the Center for Substance Abuse Studies at the California-based Institute for Scientific Analysis in a report published on the Internet. This is because traditional expectations of a self-sacrificing woman are at variance with that of a woman so selfish as to use drugs for her own pleasure. Seema Kejriwal*, who, as a supportive wife of an alcoholic, attends AA meetings, agrees. Kejriwal has stood by her husband, supporting him emotionally and

financially for nine years as he battled with his addiction. "We were reduced to poverty and I had to take a job to support us, leaving my two-year-old son with a man who could not tell the day from night," she says, adding that she is fully aware of the fact that had she been in the same situation, her husband would have thrown her out long ago.

Compounding these problems are the effects of drugs on the physical and mental health of women. Studies have proved that women have a higher risk than men to addiction to certain drugs such as crack cocaine, even after casual or experimental use. In Murthy's study, respondents reported insomnia, menstrual irregularities, depression and anxiety. Some even suffered miscarriages or were forced to undergo pregnancy terminations. "Pregnant women who take alcohol or abuse drugs," says Delhi-based gynaecologist Sohani Verma, "are also more prone to having children with congenital defects or Foetal Alcohol Syndrome. While pregnant women on drugs can go into premature labour, babies suffering from FAS are usually underweight and often have defects such as mental retardation, delayed development and, as they grow older, behaviour problems. A scary price to pay for a "kick" that only briefly masks the pain of reality. ■

PATTERNS OF DRUG ABUSE AMONG WOMEN

Brown Sugar **43%**

Propoxyphene **17%**

Alcohol **16%**

Tranquillisers **11%**

Cannabis **5%**

Others **8%**

Source: A MSJE and UNDCP study

/// Women no longer take drugs only due to stress but also for pleasure. /// PRATIMA MURTHY, NIMHANS, Bangalore

*Some names have been changed to protect identities.