

May 26, 2006 – Every hundredth in Manipur is HIV positive
By Sudhir Mishra

In Manipur's Churachandpur district people's views towards HIV/AIDS have taken a dangerous turn. Instead of taking precautions, they are becoming increasingly careless. Kennedy is HIV positive, but his educated girlfriend is ready to marry him. She feels that eventually life is in God's hands. Unlike the rest of the country, where people living with HIV face acute stigma, the north-east is different. The prevalence is so high that people believe it is no longer in their hands to protect themselves. They have left it all to God.

This correspondent reached the beautiful valley surrounded by mountains on a Kaiser Health Journalism Fellowship. Once called the Switzerland of the East, these North-Eastern states look terror-struck. The general population is trying hard to live with both the military and the militants. An entire generation of youth could be wiped out. In such a depressing scenario young people take drugs and sex follows.

K. Mahrabi Singh of United Voluntary Youth Counseling says, "A few years from now only children and aged will be alive to tell the tale..." Of the 2.2 million living in the state, every hundredth is HIV positive. Out of these, 81 per cent are young people. The recent numbers of the Manipur AIDS Control Society's survey prove this trend.

According to Twang, the Chief of the Manipur Network of Positive People, because of the over exposure, people are not afraid of HIV/AIDS any more. Both girls and boys are getting married to positive people even after knowing the status of their spouse. MNP's Twang says they think whatever God has decided will happen. He knows that scientifically it is incorrect, yet people do not want to do anything about it.

Twang himself was an Injecting Drug User (IDU). According to him, in these centers human rights are being violated. In this district there are six Drugs-Free Centres where drug-users are tied up, beaten and deprived of water for days. Girls and boys are kept separately. With continuous administering of drugs they are disoriented. At times they are violent, too. Twang said, "increasing use of injecting drugs is one of the factors which has led to poverty. Instead of smoking heroin, they inject it, which allows them to use one dose three-four times."

What is of concern here is that a single needle is used by many individuals. To check this, a needle exchange programme has been introduced by NACO, but it is not very successful and its reach is limited. According to Samiran Panda, Associate Editor of International Journal of Drug Policy, which is also working with Indian Government's Social Justice and Empowerment – "Manipur's youth, especially women and children, should be cautioned against the devastating effects of drugs. It must be done sensitively, so that it does not prove even more dangerous."