



WHAT HAS THE GOVERNMENT
PLANNED FOR 2021!

LEGALIZATION OF MARIJUANA

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Marijuana, or its alternatives such as ganja, hash or bhang are all derivatives of a plant named Cannabis. According to the ex-Commissioner of India, Ramesh Bhattacharya, cannabis is cultivated in approximately 400 out of 640 districts of India. Delhi and Mumbai also rank among the world's top 10 cities with the highest rates of marijuana consumption. So, it raises the question, is marijuana legal in India? The answer is no, and here's why.

Almost everyone is familiar with the fact that India's religious and cultural history associates a lot with ecological medicine and herbal recreation, that herb being cannabis.

In the Atharva Veda, one of the four sacred texts of Hinduism, cannabis is named one of the five most sacred plants on Earth and is also lauded for being a cure to illness and driving away demons.

In India, it has always been legally allowed to use cannabis or its by-products in proprietary ayurvedic medicines. India has a long history of cannabis and opium use and permitted sales and taxation before the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotic substances Act (NDPS) was passed in 1985, because of pressure to criminalize weed by the USA.

But this act allows the state government to allow controlled and regulated cultivation of hemp for obtaining fiber and seed for Industrial and horticultural purposes. It is also licensed and legally allowed to use cannabis leaf in predefined proportions in clinical trials under prescription by medical professionals.

While the discussion needs consideration from multiple disciplines including economic, legal and cultural standpoints, the prescience behind legalization of marijuana is to be able to build a system that effectively manages its industrial produce and limits health issues.



The western Indian state of Gujarat legalized bhang in 2017 by removing it from the list of "intoxicating drugs" covered under Section 23 of the Gujarat Prohibition Act. In 2018, Uttarakhand became the first state in the country to do so, allowing the cultivation of low THC (Tetrahydrocannabinol) strains of cannabis plants. Uttar Pradesh has since followed the same policy and in November 2019, Madhya Pradesh decided to legalize hemp cultivation for medicinal and industrial purposes. It was published in February 2020 that the BJP government in Manipur is also considering legalizing marijuana cultivation.

Even more recently, while announcing the state budget in March 2021, Himanchal Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur said that the state is coming up with a policy to allow controlled cultivation of cannabis in the state.

Thakur said the government has not yet discussed "the legal process of obtaining licenses for cultivation".

"It is a long process because several thousand hectares of land in the state is already under illicit cultivation," he said. "The details regarding the cannabis varieties suitable for cultivation and the research and development behind this are still under process."

A government spokesperson, Shrikant Sharma said that the introduction of legalized hemp farming could help improve farmers income significantly. Cannabis extract is used in making medicines for the treatment of Cancer and Alzheimer's. Ministry of Textiles with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) have also been working on popularizing the use of cannabis plant as a fiber.

Himachal Pradesh hopes to earn ₹18,000 crore annually by undertaking the controlled cultivation of cannabis to ease its debt burden that has grown to ₹60,500 crore in the Covid-19 pandemic year besides generating job opportunities. "The state is facing a financial crisis. The controlled cultivation of cannabis will boost the economy as the government aims to earn ₹18,000 crore," says Pradeep Chauhan, a retired economic adviser to the state government. The initiative will provide employment nearly 50,000 youngsters and directly benefit 2.8 lakh families in the low-income group, he says.

The entire Kullu district and parts of Mandi, Chamba and Shimla are into cultivation of the weed as a cash crop, though it is done quite clandestinely. The picturesque Kullu region and its famed tourist destination of Manali and Parvati have also become known as an international hub for the smuggling of drugs.

Thakur said cultivation of cannabis can become a major source of income in Himachal Pradesh, provided proper laws are made for it. "The cannabis produced in Himachal has been found to be of very high quality and therefore there is potential to undertake its controlled cultivation". He said under the NDPS Act 1985, there are legal provisions for cultivation, production, maintenance and transportation of cannabis in the state. Under this, the state government can make rules for the cultivation of cannabis in the state.

Hemp agriculture also has the potential to add more to the State's income and surpass apple as the main cash crop. Legalization of marijuana would make the state more progressive, reduce expenditure and hence, lead to gradual increase in GDP.

Allowing farmers to cultivate weed will give them a stake in the \$1.5 trillion industry which is currently dominated by China, Germany and France.

Regularizing the plant could create an industrial hemp textile industry in India that could be valued at an estimate of Rs.240 million.

CM Thakur said, "This creates investment and employment opportunities. The state government proposes to frame a policy to permit commercial hemp cultivation with proper regulatory framework,"

The Himachal Pradesh Government is hoping that the decision will attract a rapidly growing hemp industry and generate employment at a time when 57% of the country's working population are worried that they'll lose their jobs due to the pandemic-related economic crisis.

Legalizing marijuana can also help reduce addictive behavior by erasing the stigma around it. For instance, cannabis use fell drastically in Portugal after the country decriminalized weed and hash use in 2001. Among the strongest arguments advanced by those in favor of legalizing cannabis is that the law has not served its purpose and a legalized product could also be better regulated for quality, price and commercial purposes. "There are a lot of adulterated cannabis products in the market. These are far more harmful than the pure plant. But there is no way to control quality for an illegal drug," says Dr. Rajkumar





“Cannabis consumption and production cannot be controlled in India. There is no point in turning a blind eye to the millions who consume it across the country. Given the consumption, the arrests under NDPS Act for cannabis are very little and largely done to heckle the common man. Doing away with a law which has not succeeded will provide relief to many,” says ex-Narcotics commissioner Bhattacharjee.

“The crime rate might fall, but the addictive nature of drugs won’t change. We don’t need to make marijuana legal to protect young people from drug addiction, we need more dialogue over its influence and negative effects,” says Dr Luther. According to him, any attempt to legalize must be followed up with an open dialogue on drugs with young people, to make them aware of responsible and safe drug consumption.

The quality, as well as quantity of hemp, supplied needs to improve, requiring investment in research and development of better seeds and cultivation practices. Dilsher Dhaliwal, the founder of Everest Eco Hemp, India’s largest licensed hemp producer, said in an earlier interview, “Government regulations have a role to play. Cannabis’ classification as a narcotic places it under the jurisdiction of the excise department. With the excise department being a regulatory body, research into hemp was difficult to conduct until recently.” He added, “keeping THC levels below 0.3% isn’t easy, since Indian cannabis species tend to be high-THC, seeds need to be grafted with imported low-THC varieties.

A number of promising Indian cannabis start-ups have arisen in recent years, some of whom are collaborating to grow in the domestic market. For India, with a population of over 1.4 billion and a growing middle class the potential market for marijuana products is substantial.

These start-ups are generally focusing on medicines, cosmetics, textiles, accessories and foods. One of the most promising is Boheco (the Bombay Hemp Company), which is backed by high-profile investors including Google India’s Managing Director Rajan Anandan, and Ratan Tata of Tata Sons. The company is agro-based and intends to reimagine the future of Indian agriculture and sustainable living with hemp. It is also a major supplier of raw material to fellow start-ups, Hempster and B.E. Hemp.

In February 2020, the India-based healthcare start-up HempStreet (who concentrate on the use of cannabis in Ayurvedic medicine) raised USD \$1 million in pre-series A funding. According to a report by Grand View Research Inc., the global legal marijuana market is predicted to reach USD \$146.4 billion by the end of 2025.

Another thing that the government could do is promoting such organizations working on hemp cultivation. With the Indian sub-continent going through such tough times with the Covid-19 crisis, expansion in cultivation of this trillion dollar crop would be a path breaking change.