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Tobaccoless Village

Choodie Shivaram, Kerala

The smoking image has had healthier days. Hollywood movies once flaunted heroines puffing the parched cocoa leaf as though inhaling divine amrita. And men, west and east, have always brutishly enjoyed the macho-ness of nursing a nicotine weed. But today smoking is increasingly considered a dirty habit--something done in private and not talked about. Smoking is now banned on numerous major airlines, and many corporations make smokers go outside to "do it."

Even in India--a land without tough surgeon generals and no historical objection to smoking just about anything--tobacco smoking is losing its decent image. In fact, one village in Kerala acknowledged that the habit is so deadly, that citizens got together and outlawed it completely. When I heard this, I went there, to Koolimad, a verdant, picturesque hamlet. I found out right away that it was the youthful members of the village's library reading room who spearheaded this remarkable feat. "During our annual meeting, one member was smoking non-stop," young Sunil recounted to me. "A villager had just died of cancer, and this disturbed us. So, one of our members suggested a campaign against smoking and chewing tobacco. We went house to house on a signature

campaign, explaining all the ill-effects of tobacco. The villagers were persuaded, and gradually the campaign turned into a resolution. Shopkeepers agreed to stop selling tobacco and youth bought and burned all remaining stocks of tobacco in a bonfire. Everyone made pledges to stop smoking--even chain-smokers. Womenfolk kept strict vigils on their men. Old people were the hardest to convince. They kept grumbling, 'Let us enjoy the last few years of our lives!' But they were compelled to stop. Everyone stuck to their word. 'Now, if anyone wants to smoke they have to go to another village,' Shaji enjoyed telling me. 'Anyone breaking the pledge, smoking here in Koolimad, risks being excommunicated! Actually, we are all like a well-knit family and have had no problems. Everyone is now taking pride in our achievement.' "

As statutory warnings on cigarette packets and government anti-smoking campaigns prove ineffective, the village of Koolimad shows what youth can do to awake, arise and uplift India when conscience combines with their innate verve.