

[India Doesn't Need More Tobacco](#)

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MINISTERS MESSAGE

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Religious organizations have the duty and ability to counter this unwelcome invasion

Imagine a country releasing a biological weapon on another country. Firstly, using a biological weapon would be wrong. If it were accidental, it would still be wrong. And if it was fired purposefully in peacetime, it would be shameless, criminal and downright barbaric. What then is to be said for multinationals bombarding India with cigarettes?! As the big tobacco companies start to lose customers in the West, they have turned to China, India and other countries to find new markets. Does the slower rate of killing, relative to the military bio-weapons, condone the act? As it is, one million people in India die annually from cigarette smoking.

In India, over 300 million Indians--around 80% of all males and 40% of all females--use tobacco in the form of snuff, bidis, gutkas and masala; around 100 million (one-third) in the form of cigarettes. Of these, about 730,000 die annually from smoking, about 82 per hour. The figures for tobacco-related cancers are equally disturbing. Fifty percent of all male cancers and 20% of all female cancers are tobacco related according to Dr. D.V. Bala, an epidemiologist at the Gujarat Cancer Research Institute here in Amdavad. The companies'

ruthless campaign will mean that both the incidence of tobacco related disease and mortality will escalate. They see nothing unethical in exploiting commercial opportunities, taking advantage of the gullibility and ignorance of a large section of the population.

Recently revealed internal tobacco documents support this. A 1976 R.J. Reynolds (RJR) document quoted, "The 14- to 18-year- old group is an increasing segment of the smoking population. RJR must soon establish a successful new brand in this market." To this, the Acting Governor of Massachusetts, Paul Cellucci, replied, "This campaign reveals the truth that the tobacco industry has been going after our children with an addictive product that can kill them." (See www.tobaccodocuments.org for access to internal tobacco company tactical documents released in US court.)

Tobacco merchants' aggressiveness is already evident in India. They sponsor sports events to the extent that each major cigarette brand is now identified with a specific sport. Television, movies and music videos, too, are targeted media. A ban on advertising on government-run TV channels in India has led Philip Morris to use cable and satellite channels instead. They even distribute free cigarettes in public places, including all the trendy discos in major cities and at garbas (traditional dances) during Navaratri festival with

teenagers and college students being the primary targets.

Youth are swayed by peers, "Cigarettes are cool, bidis are deshi." Besides peer pressure, the glamour of the powerful, yet shallow, adverts devastatingly entice them. The upper and middle class are deliberately deceived by cheap slogans such as: "Live life King size," "Made for each other," "I get what I want." They will then wish to emulate the glamour projected by the posters. Such high profile pressures, including the subtle nuances by the heroes and heroines smoking in Indian movies, quash any health awareness latent even in the youths.

For successful national tobacco control, including cigarettes, strict legislation enforced by heavy penalties seems to be an ideal option, in theory. The only cogent alternative lies with individuals, at the grassroots--focusing on the educational and spiritual dimensions.

Many social institutions and NGOs in India are

striving for public awareness of tobacco's dangers and working with anti-addiction. However, religious leaders and sects seem to have better results. A few loving words from a spiritual mentor works miracles. Pramukh Swami Maharaj has inspired thousands to avoid tobacco and intoxicants and de-addicted countless others.

Anti-smoking awareness programs in schools will undoubtedly help deter the young from falling into this fatal trap. Another approach is through hard-hitting poster exhibits. The BAPS has designed a set of shocking anti-addiction and awareness posters, depicting people with real cancers and other diseases. These are displayed for a short duration in public places such as schools, private enterprises, symposia and large festivals. Over 45,000 people annually are de-addicted successfully just through posters.

A third, innovative approach was recently implemented by five boys aged between ten and thirteen of the BAPS Children's Forum. During their summer and Diwali vacations in 1999, they trudged through the streets of Amdavad and

de-addicted 5,000 people! This personal and audacious approach by children so young humbled the toughest hearts. To please guru and Govind they gladly bore insults and even slapping by drunks. The Times of India (June 23, 1999) lauded them as "The Famous Five." This remarkable venture opened the eyes of professional NGOs striving to cope with addiction.

Finally, as a practical solution to this growing specter, there are five possible programs: 1) Persuade friends and relatives to give up smoking; 2) Hold regular parent's awareness conventions; 3) Inspire parents to sit with their children to discuss the issue; 4) Take older teenagers to visit patients suffering from tobacco related diseases; 5) Hold regular satsang at home or at a nearby center or temple.