

## **Sikhism and Smoking by Bikramjit Singh Dhillon**



Smoking and drug taking is banned in Sikhism and using tobacco is listed in the Sikh Rehit Maryada (Code of Conduct ) as one of the four transgression (Kurahits). The Sikh Rehit Maryada was drafted by an expert committee of eminent Sikh scholars. Many western friends of mine are surprised that Sikhism explicitly forbids the use of tobacco and this may be because there is no prohibition of tobacco use in other religions.

Tobacco first started being used for smoking around 100 B.C. by native Americans tribes and the Europeans first came into contact with it when Columbus discovered America. During the next two centuries tobacco use was spread by the Europeans across the entire known world. It is interesting to note that tobacco was paid to the English clergy as wages right upto the 1750's. Tobacco was introduced by the Portuguese into India during the 17th century. It was traded through the Portuguese trading post on the west coast of India. During the time of Guru Gobind Singh tobacco use had become common by the Mughal nobles.

It may appear strange to people of other religions as to why Sikhism has such a Anti-smoking stance, the reason is that smoking is recorded as being forbidden by all the Sikh writers who were contemporaries of the 10th Guru. According to these writers Guru Gobind Singh was once riding with his Sikhs when he suddenly stopped his horse and after dismounting proceeded to rip out a wild tobacco plant. The Sikhs asked why the Guru had ripped the plant out and the Guru replied that the Sikhs should avoid alcohol as it destroys a generation but tobacco destroys several generations. The Guru then forbade his Sikhs to ever use tobacco. Early European writers who came across the Sikhs in the 1780's were perplexed as to why tobacco was forbidden for the Sikhs as tobacco was being widely used by both the British and the Indians at that time. Of all the Nations that the Europeans came into contact with the Sikhs were the only one who had a religious injunction against tobacco.

Until the 1950's smoking was encouraged by governments as a means to acquire tax. Only in 1950 when Morton Levin published his study into the connection between lung cancer and smoking did any governments take notice. according to the World Health Organization report of 1995 worldwide lung cancer is the biggest single cause of cancer deaths in men. Smoking causes approximately 3 million deaths worldwide and if current trends persist it will kill 10 million a year from 2020. Smoking causes about 20.5% of all deaths in developed countries. These are frightening statistics but the biggest tragedy is that smoking is the single largest preventable factor in premature death, disability and disease. These effects of smoking are not limited to the smokers themselves but to those around them. Family, friends and even complete strangers in the smoker's vicinity suffer. Smoking while pregnant has been linked to sudden infant death syndrome (cot death), bronchitis, pneumonia and higher risk of miscarriage (The Guru had said that tobacco would destroy several generations)

Apart from the effects on health , smoking also takes a large chunk of family budgets sometimes as much as 20% if both parents smoke. Smoking is increasing in developing countries amongst people who can ill afford the habit. There are roughly 1.1 billion smokers worldwide about 17 % of the total population and about 6000 billion cigarettes are smoked every year. According to some estimates about 300 billion is spent on the habit worldwide with about 100 billion being spent in the developing countries. This sheer wastage is borne by families who live in slum quarters unable to better themselves due to the drain on their resources caused by smoking.

The Sikhs have escaped from the effects of the 'evil weed' and the absence of smoking amongst Sikhs has been noted by several western writer when they visit India. Today the Sikhs can wonder at

the foresight of their Great Guru Gobind Singh that he foresaw the miseries that would stem from the tobacco plant and wisely instructed the Sikhs to keep it at an arms length. Such foresight is indeed befitting a great prophet of Waheguru.

WAHEGURU JI KA KHALSA WAHEGURU JI KI FATEH

BIKRAMJIT SINGH