

Sheesha smoking: tobacco in disguise

Thousands of youngsters in Pakistan are getting addicted to a relatively new tobacco product Sheesha (hookah) with unchecked promotion and growing availability of this new trend in hotels, restaurants and Sheesha bars in commercial and residential areas of metropolitan cities.

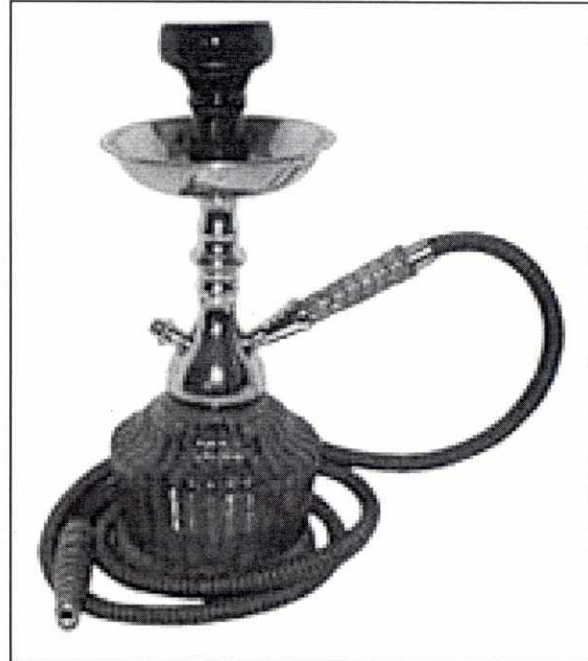
According to a latest field survey carried out by TheNetwork for Consumer Protection in twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, the restaurants and bars not only offer this tobacco product as a recreational group activity and a fashion but also clearly defy the 'Prohibition of Smoking in Enclosed Places and Protection of Non-Smokers' Health Ordinance 2002'.

It was observed that Sheesha smoking has turned into a snobbish value and status symbol. It is also propagated successfully that Sheesha is not a tobacco product, while the fact is that the paste, the smoke of which is inhaled contains tobacco and molasses along with some fruit flavours. It seems that the players who have vested interests in spreading tobacco have diverted their attention towards the promotion of Sheesha realizing the growing awareness among masses on other tobacco products like cigarettes, chewing tobacco and hookah etc.

Like the traditional tobacco industry, the Sheesha industry also targets youngsters.

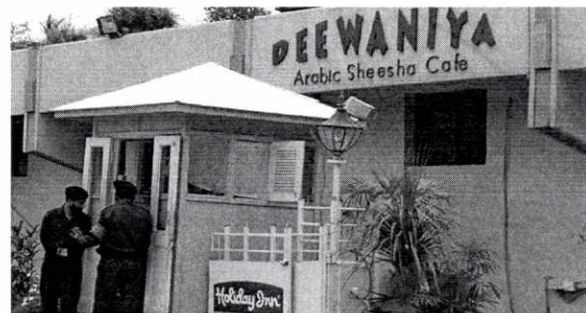
'Sheesha is available here'

During a latest field survey carried out by TheNetwork for Consumer Protection, it was found that 50 per cent of big hotels and restaurants offer Sheesha smoking. Besides that many Sheesha Bars are opened in the commercial and residential areas of the twin cities, which exclusively offer Sheesha with various flavours.



Besides attaching a lot of attraction to Sheesha for youngsters, Sheesha smoking is successfully linked with the social status.

The people who are made to believe that Sheesha is not a tobacco product not only destroy their money but also put their lives at stake as Sheesha is as injurious as any other tobacco product. Health hazards related to Sheesha use are enhanced rather than that of tobacco use in other forms since Sheesha inhaling is excessive and is a relatively longer activity spanning from a few minutes to over an hour and a lot of nicotine and tar is inhaled



A Sheesha café in a hotel in federal capital



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In almost all Sheesha offering hotels, the youngsters, some of whom were underage (less than 18 years of age) found smoking without any hesitation though fewer hotels bothered to display a warning, 'underage sale is prohibited'. But, such warnings serve no practical purpose as the management could neither afford to concede a loss in their income nor displease the young elite generation at any cost.

The youngsters start thronging the Sheesha bars opened in markets and even residential areas in the evenings and this smoky hullabaloo continues till late night.

Sheesha is also becoming an essential drawing room piece for upper class as a part of modern fashion. The hookah and paste are available on departmental stores and even on medical stores.

Tobacco promotion, the Sheesha way:

New ways and means are being adopted to promote Sheesha smoking. Hotels, restaurants and bars provide such an environment to Sheesha smokers that it becomes attractive for youngsters and first time visitors. Semi-dark rooms with light music and Arabic dance on TV make the environment romantic.

The attractive design of hookah, menu and paste packet offering a variety of flavours against varied prices make the young groups able to celebrate some smoking as a group recreational activity.

In a smoking session which normally culminates in an hour, an individual takes 200 puffs of Sheesha, which is equal to inhaling eight cigarettes.



Youngsters enjoying Sheesha at a Rawalpindi restaurant

The unchecked outdoor advertisements of Sheesha bars and restaurants in the form of billboards and posters also play a vital role in attracting more and more people to this activity.

Open Violation of Law

According to the 'Prohibition of Smoking in Enclosed Places and Protection of Non-Smokers' Health Ordinance 2002', smoking is not allowed at enclosed public places including hotels and restaurants but the implementation of law in the context of Sheesha smoking is invisible.

Sheesha is available even at Food Streets. According to the section-8 of the same law, "No person shall sale cigarettes or any other such smoking substance to any who is below the age of eighteen years" but this law has been openly violated at Sheesha Bars and hotels where there is no limitation of age for Sheesha smoking.

Regarding the advertisement of the tobacco products, there are



A roadside billboard inviting consumers to Sheesha smoking



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clear directions in the law but huge billboards for the promotion of Sheesha smoking are explicitly inviting the consumers.

Those people in the hotels and restaurants also get affected who do not smoke themselves whereas according to law, use of tobacco products is strictly prohibited at any enclosed place in the presence of non-smokers.

Tobacco products at medical stores?

It is a matter of grief and apprehension that the promoters of Sheesha have no concern about exploitation of the ethics and violating national law. Their only concern is related to the maximization of their income anyway. A pharmacy chain in Rawalpindi and Islamabad has established separate corner for the sale of Sheesha, imported brands of cigarettes and other tobacco products where each and every sort of Sheesha is available. Most throbbing aspect of the issue is that they have decorated best quality cigarettes and other tobacco products in a shameless manner. What a link between the life saving drugs and the business



Sheesha corner at a medical store in Islamabad

of selling death.

What is Sheesha? Where it comes from? How it is different from traditional hookah?

Sheesha is the modern form of Arabian Hookah. It is called as Nargila in Lebanon, Sheesha in Egypt and hookah in English language.

It is commonly believed that hookah was discovered in Indo-Pak sub-continent and approached other nations and civilizations via Iran. There was a revolutionary change in Turkey where it was converted into water pipe.

Sheesha is comparatively new in Pakistan. Its basic structure is built of glass whose upper most part is known as Tobacco bowl where Sheesha mixture is placed over a charcoal tray.

A burning coal provides heat to the mixture of tobacco and fruit flavors. This is the only difference between the traditional hookah and Sheesha that tobacco is not directly burnt in Sheesha as in the case of hookah, instead it is

melted by burning the coal. Experts describe this difference as the presence of molasses in the mixture of hookah while the traditional hookah is used by preparing molasses with the help of tobacco and Gur.

There are two pipes below the tobacco bowl and charcoal tray. The function of one pipe is to excrete the smoke coming from the liquid of the base while the other is used to inhale the smoke inside the lungs. The glass base is present at the bottom of the apparatus and it is filled with any liquid such as water, milk or juices.

The fragrance of this flavored liquid enters into the inhaling pipe and sweetens the puffs. Sheesha is an expensive hookah which costs from 6000 to 12000 rupees. The mixture used in the tobacco bowl costs between 260 to 800 rupees depending upon the quality and quantity of the ingredients. The tobacco bowl can be



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filled 12 times with the help of using smallest packet of the mixture. This mixture is imported or smuggled from UAE, Syria and Egypt.

For one time usage of the Sheesha apparatus,

Hazards of Sheesha smoking

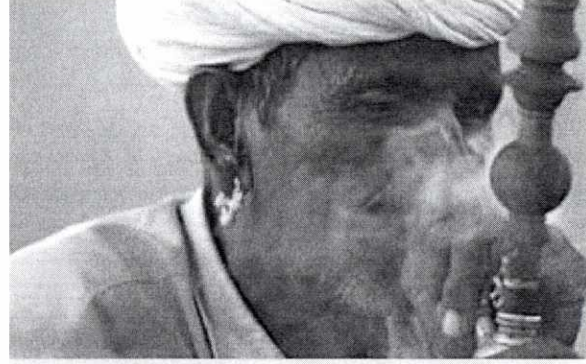
Unfortunately most people who use Sheesha are not aware of its harmful effects. Most restaurant owners tell their customers that it is merely flavoured smoke and that there is no tobacco in it.

However, the World Health Organization (WHO) recently released a report on the health consequences of Sheesha use and it has proved to be an eye-opener. A commonly held belief is that Sheesha is harmless because the smoke first passes through water before it is inhaled.

Sheesha smoking sessions last for 20-80 minutes, during which the smoker may take anywhere between 50 and 200 puffs. The Sheesha smoker may therefore inhale as much smoke during one session as a cigarette smoker would inhale consuming 100 or more cigarettes. Even after it has passed through water, the smoke produced by a Sheesha contains a high level of toxins, including carbon monoxide, heavy metals and other carcinogens.

A similar hazard is posed to other people who are not directly using Sheesha by means of passive smoking. It is indeed said that in spite of an ordinance in place which bans smoking in public places many restaurants offer Sheesha to their customers.

people pay from 100 to 300 rupees or even more. It is indeed a profitable business for the owners of hotels and Sheesha bars. This profit forbids them to look over the health of the masses and the law.



Smoking in any form is a killer

Tobacco used in these water pipes is often sweetened and flavoured, making it very appealing to children and teenagers. A survey done on youngsters of school-going age in Karachi recently showed that almost 70 per cent had tried Sheesha in the past six months, and this included children as young as seven.

Many of the commercially available packets which are used for Sheesha smoking have misleading labels such as 0.5 per cent nicotine and zero tar. WHO in its report has strongly recommended that healthcare professionals educate the public about the potential dangers of Sheesha use.

Moreover, the sharing of Sheesha between people poses an additional risk of TB and hepatitis transmission.

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