

# GANDHI *and* HEALTH @ 150

---

*Footprints of ICMR's century-long journey*



## MAHATMA GANDHI'S PERSPECTIVE ON TOBACCO

---

**RAVI MEHROTRA\* & PRASHANT KUMAR SINGH**

ICMR – NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF CANCER PREVENTION AND RESEARCH, NOIDA, INDIA

Received November 19, 2018

**M**ahatma Gandhi – an independent thinker of contemporary India – looked at many ideas including the use of tobacco. He once stated that “it is health that is real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver” for any individual. Two of the Mahatma’s books, *Key to Health* and *My Early Life*, are the prominent writings which significantly shed light on the importance of his ideas on health and tobacco.

Gandhi himself indulged in the use of tobacco in his early days, but soon got familiar with its harmful health effects, leading to his transition as a major anti-tobacco crusader. He was concerned with both smoke and smokeless tobacco use and its adverse impact on health. He once stated, “I can certainly say that I am not aware of a single advantage occurring from the use of tobacco.”

Earlier, in the general populace, smoking was limited and mainly confined to private buildings. But under the influence of the British, it became wide spread in consumption at public places. People used tobacco in the form of smoking, snuffing and chewing. Some believed that snuff had a beneficial effect, and they used it under the advice of *vaidyas* and *hakims*. Gandhi believed that it was neither necessary nor beneficial for human consumption. Among all the three forms in which tobacco was used in India, chewing tobacco was the dirtiest, Gandhi said. He quite often refers to a popular saying in Gujarati, which says, “all the three are equally guilty:

the smoker fills his house with smoke, the chewer dirties every corner and spoils his clothes.”

Gandhi discussed the various ill effects of tobacco on human health including lung diseases, impaired eye-sight, digestion-related problems and poor cognitive ability. He was of the opinion that tobacco adversely affects one’s consciousness, and leads to a habit, which is difficult to get rid of, thereby considered as an expensive vice. He further mentioned that the use of tobacco use fouls the breath, spoils the teeth and also causes cancer.

Unfortunately, during the Gandhian era, certain manufacturing companies started selling cigarettes bearing the name of ‘Mahatma Gandhi’ in spite of his opposing the tobacco use. In his response to a correspondence made in 1921, he stated “of all the abuses to which my name has been put, I know nothing so humiliating to me as the deliberate association of my name with cigarettes.” He revealed that no one had received his permission to associate his name with any tobacco product. It shows how much he opposed tobacco use.

Gandhi was not merely concerned about the tobacco users but raised his voice against second-hand smoke faced by non-smokers. He was of the opinion that tobacco users are careless of others’ choices. He noted that non-tobacco users generally cannot bear the smell of tobacco, but one often comes across people in public places who do smoke.



Mahatma Gandhi, accompanied by Dr. Sushila Nayyar, visits CIPLA (Chemical Industrial and Pharmaceutical Laboratory), Bombay, July 4, 1939.



ICMR – National Institute of Cancer Prevention and Research, Noida.

Both smoke and smokeless tobacco cause salivation and most smokers have no hesitation in spitting anywhere, which causes great amount of discomfort to non-tobacco users.

#### ICMR's initiatives in fight against Tobacco

- WHO FCTC Global Knowledge Hub on Smokeless Tobacco: NICPR
- Published book, *Global smokeless Tobacco Control Policies and their implementation*
- Website, "India against Cancer" for cancer awareness
- National Tobacco Testing Laboratory
- Project ECHO: Virtual advanced cancer screening training to detect oral cancer

He was also very much concerned with the rising cost of tobacco in India during 1923–1927. One of his responses to a correspondent who was interested to know about Gandhi's view on reforms for tobacco use in 1928 revealed his apprehensions against increase in the imports of tobacco products from 1.25 million lbs. in 1923 to 5 million lbs. in 1927. He strongly suggested, "If every tobacco user stopped the dirty habit, refused to make his mouth his chimney to foul his breath, damage his teeth and contribute his saving to any national cause, he would benefit himself and the nation both."

Thus, we find that Mahatma Gandhi had a clear vision and voice against the vice of tobacco. He categorically integrated the role of collective efforts towards tobacco control and its long-term impact on the growth of the individual and nation. The

ongoing efforts of the governments and civil society organizations can use the thoughts and directions of the Mahatma's philosophy for anti-tobacco activism.

**FINANCIAL SUPPORT & SPONSORSHIP:** *None*

**CONFLICTS OF INTEREST:** *None*

#### REFERENCES

- Avyakta. Gandhi saw it coming: 'Hypocrites prosper in their hypocrisy by dressing themselves in khadi' [Internet]. 2017. Available from: <https://scroll.in/article/828026/gandhi-saw-it-cominghypocrites-prosper-in-their-hypocrisy-by-dressingthemselves-in-khadi>, accessed on November 11, 2018.
- Chauhan M. Gandhian Views on Health [Internet]. Available from: [https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/g\\_health.html](https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/g_health.html), accessed on November 11, 2018.
- Gandhi MK. Key to Health. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad; 1948.
- Government of India. Importance of Gandhian thoughts about Cleanliness [Internet]. Available from: <https://www.gandhi.gov.in/gandhi-cleanliness.html>, accessed on November 11, 2018.
- Kakkar R. What can athletes learn about failure from the life of Mahatma Gandhi? [Internet]. 2015. Available from: <https://www.firstpost.com/sports/lessons-in-failure-forathletes-from-mahatma-gandhi-2453120.html>, accessed on November 11, 2018.
- South Asian research Centre for Advertisement, Journalism & Cartoons. Mahatma Gandhi on Tobacco [Internet]. Available from: <https://www.sarcajc.com/mahatma-gandhi-on-tobacco.html>, accessed on November 11, 2018.
- Vijetha SN. Gandhiji's experiments with smoking and his teenage angst. [Internet]. 2012. Available from: <https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-in-school/Gandhiji%E2%80%99s-experiments-with-smokingand-his-teenage-angst.../article12542645.ece>, accessed on November 11, 2018.

\*For correspondence: Dr. Ravi Mehrotra, Director, ICMR – National Institute of Cancer Prevention and Research, I-7, Sector 39, Noida 201301, Uttar Pradesh, India  
e-mail: rmehrotra@icmr.org.in



Mahatma Gandhi planting a tree in the garden of Kingsley Hall, London, December 3, 1931.