Blaming Jean Nicot, Thinking Sultan Murad – Tobacco Control in Pakistan

By Wasif Naqvi

The legend goes that Jean Nicot, a French diplomat and a scholar was detailed by the French Court in 1559 as an Ambassador at Portugal to negotiate the marriage of six years old princess Margret of Valois to the five years old King Sebastian of Portugal (talk about child-marriages!). The deal fell through, however Nicot on his return in 1561, brought along a very special gift for the French Court – a plant claiming to contain “cure for many diseases” such as tumor, cancer, gout and headache – Tobacco! Nicot thus became the first tobacco smoker and nicotine is said to be a derivative of his name, the person who introduced tobacco to France and later to most of the Northern Europe. Within a few years Nicot’s gift to the French Court became a fashion among the French aristocracy.

Use of tobacco for pleasure dates farther back in the Levant and to Safavid Dynasty of Persia and Mughals in India. The realization did not take long to creep in that this plant is anything but a “cure” and soon enough tobacco control laws were enacted. The Catholic Church in Mexico was the first one to ban smoking in 1575. King James–I of England followed the suit slapping 4000% tax increase (bless his soul!) and published his treatise “Counterblaste to Tobacco” stating that smoking is “a custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black, stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless”. Most of the Europe enacted multiple tobacco ban laws in the 17th Century, however, these laws dampened to a great extent in the 18th and 19th Centuries. Probably because of the reason that the governments realized just how much money could be made taxing the tobacco instead of outright banning it.

Regardless, the greed realization rolled in and to increase yield and reduce the production time, multiple chemicals found their way into the crop line in early 1950s. The desire to yield bumper crops enticed the farmers to use more and variety of chemicals without paying special attention to the short and long term effects of these excessive chemicals in comestible items such as tobacco crop. As per one research there are more than 4300 known chemicals in modern day cigarettes, out of which scores are proven to cause cancer and 11 are confirmed Grade–I carcinogens. The facts about smoking are shocking if not outright unbelievable.

World Health Organization (WHO) claims that currently there are almost 1.1 billion smokers around the globe and the number is likely to reach 1.6 billion by 2025. Around the world almost 6 million people die because of tobacco each year, a number that is one million more than HIV, malaria and Tuberculosis related deaths combined. Almost 480,000 Americans die each year because of the smoking related diseases, number of similar deaths, out of almost 24 million smokers in Pakistan, is 160,100 (15% are second-hand smokers – beware!). Pakistan also ranks among the top 10 countries with most worrying tobacco consumption trends.

In Pakistan the first of the kind tobacco control laws “West Pakistan Tobacco Vend Rules” were passed in 1958, to be followed by 1979 “Cigarettes (Printing of Warning) Ordinance”. Serious tobacco control regulation in Pakistan started after the turn of the century as the country became a party to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) on 27 Feb 2005. Multiple Statutory Regulatory Orders (SROs) were passed from time to time targeting smoking ad ban, restricting smoking spaces, taxation and pricing control and Graphic Health Warning (GHW) etc. Many of these laws are effective today although a few have been revoked/ altered under the political and tobacco industry pressure.

Unfortunately millions continue to use smoking and
smokeless tobacco and thousands are added to this number every years (most of them youth). The resolve in facing the tobacco menace head on needs to be inculcated in the government quarters and Pakistani ruling culture. Pakistan could learn a lesson or two from its regional neighbors. Bhutan, for example, promulgated “Tobacco Control Act 2010” to regulate tobacco and tobacco products, completely banning the cultivation, harvesting, production and sale of tobacco and tobacco products. Similarly in Nepal 90% of the cigarette pack is covered with GHW both on front and back. In Pakistan a law was proposed for similar GHW covering 85% of the pack, which fell victim to political and tobacco industry influence and could not be enacted in letter and spirit. The case for revival of this law is pending decision before the Islamabad High Court.

In face of sluggish implementation, absence of understanding of the tobacco related issues among policy makers and regulatory decay, is it surprising that the number of tobacco related diseases and deaths is on the rise in Pakistan? Should we really continue “blaming” Jean Nicot or “think” Sultan Murad of Turkey (1612-1649) who banned tobacco and executed up to 18 people daily for violations?

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