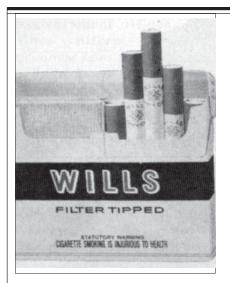
HEALTH



Dangerous Seduction

Tobacco Onslaught Through Sporting Events

Bharat R. Sant

HE 1996 Wills World Cup was a colossal event watched by over two billion viewers "live" on television. It is likely that a majority of these viewers were youngsters, teen and pre-teenagers for whom a Sachin Tendulkar and a Brian Lara are not just heroes, but demi-gods. While watching their favorite players, the youngsters were also seeing, consciously or unconsciously, the Wills promotions at every blink of their eyes.

The most sophisticated part of the sponsor's marketing salesmanship was asking players to wear a uniform with the Wills emblem emblazoned on their shirt pocket and shirt sleeve — the left arm for a right-handed batsman, and vice-versa. It does not require a great knowledge of psychology to realise the profound impact the word "Wills" was making on the minds of these young people.

A mini-survey of teenagers carried out in Goa after the Wills New Zealand vs. India series revealed some interesting results. Seventy percent felt there was at least one smoker on the team, and 11 to 13 percent believed that a majority of players were smokers, and that smoking improves the

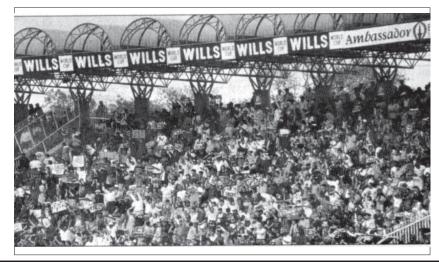
performance of players. Projecting the survey results to the national level, more than 3.6 million children between the ages of 11 and 18 are likely to try Wills. Smoking and tobacco usage are increasing, particularly among young people. Four million children below the age of 15 are addicted to tobacco in India and 5,500 children are added every day.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has reported a 67 percent increase in cigarette consumption since 1970 in developing countries. Meanwhile, WHO reports that a virtual war on tobacco in the developed countries is already yielding results. During this period, per capita cigarette consumption in developed countries has declined by ten percent.

As the ill effects of smoking are

being realised more and more in the last two decades in the developed countries, tobacco companies are becoming worried about their sales and profits. They are now adopting a threefold strategy: they are challenging the often-claimed tobacco-disease relationship and are simultaneously invoking the fundamental right of personal freedom; also, tobacco companies are shifting their sales promotion activities to developing countries. They employ sophisticated methods to entice young smokers through attractive advertisements.

A marketing study which was carried out by the University of British Columbia has come to the conclusion that sensitivity to advertising is three times greater among teenagers than among adults. "The cigarette



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advertising for market share is primarily a battle of brand for consumption by the young," said Dr. Richard Polly, a member of the study group.

The tobacco industry insists that its advertisements are not aimed at teenagers and preteens, and claims that promotions are designed only to get existing smokers to switch brands. However, according to the American Cancer Society President, George Dessart, "Whatever they intend in their advertising, the result is clear, to increase smoking among children and the young." (*The Asian Age* April 5, 1996).

The Times of India, Bombay of April 3, 1996, reported that 2,250 Bombayites and 200,000 Indians die every year from lung cancer. "Experts allege that cigarette manufacturers peg the tar and nicotine content to addictive levels as a ruse to capture more smokers. This nicotine-tar combination is as addictive as heroin or cocaine."

It has been known for long that tobacco is inextricably linked to a number of health problems including coronary heart disease, lung cancer, and bronchitis. It can cause foetal abnormalities among pregnant women who smoke. Children of smoking parents, especially if the mother is a smoker, have a greater prevalence of asthma than children of non-smokers.

With the heightened awareness in developed countries about the ill effects of tobacco products, public and government pressure has been generated against tobacco usage.

In Australia, the National Health and Research Council is asking for a crackdown on smoking in all public places and a ban on smoking in cars if children are passengers due to the serious health risks of inhaling second-hand smoke. Australia spends 9.2 billion Australian dollars annually on



health care for tobacco-related diseases. Dr. David Weedon, President of the Australian Medical Association, nominated smoking as the "largest preventable cause of death in Australia."

Meanwhile, in Canada the cost of treating cancer has reached 83.5 billion dollars in 1993, which is nearly double what was spent seven years ago, in 1986. Canadians have urged the federal government to stiffen laws governing the sales and use of tobacco products.

The Federal Health Minister of Canada has unveiled a package of tobacco control measures which would give Canada the world's strictest antismoking laws. The package includes a complete ban on tobacco advertising and severe limitations on tobacco

company sponsorships of cultural and sporting events. Said the Minister, "We will not permit the marketing and sale of products that kill so many Canadians to go unregulated," (*The Lancet;* January 20 and February 24, 1995).

What is happening in India? The Indian government has enacted a law that requires cigarette companies to print a statutory warning on every cigarette packet: Cigarette smoking is injurious to health. This is done without exception. Government has banned advertising on radio and television, and this too is followed faithfully. Smoking is prohibited in airflights, buses, many public places, and government offices. Indian Airlines offers 50 percent concessional rates to cancer patients going to treatment centers as a relief for those affected.

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But our most polite interdiction is Thankyou-for-not-smoking, boldly written or displayed in many officers' chambers.

In general, there appears to be an awareness in our country about both active and passive smoking. It has been reported that the government is considering a ban on tobacco cultivation. At its annual meeting held in Bangalore in November 1995, the International Tobacco Growers' Association (ITGA) made a plea to the government not to enact the ban because more than 45 lakh people are directly involved in tobacco cultivation and it is their main source of livelihood. The only unfortunate part of the event was that speaker after speaker denied any relationship between tobacco usage and health problems.

So we act in contradictory ways—we extend special facilities to cancer patients, we ban, prohibit and discourage the use of tobacco, and even compel cigarette companies to print a statutory health warning on tobacco products, but we also support sponsorship of popular sports by cigarette manufacturers. Even Indian Airlines was proudly announcing that they were the "official carriers" for the Wills World Cup.

There was hardly any protest or even a murmur from any quarter about Wills' sponsorship of the World Cup. Government and semi-government organisations were wholly cooperating with the event. All the good that bans and years of statutory warnings may have accomplished has been virtually washed out in the glamour of the Wills World Cup.

It is now for our society, that has decidedly enlightened parents, prudent elders, and erudite leaders, to raise their voice against such advertising, promotion, and sponsorship of cultural and sporting events.

Professor Bharat R. Sant, formerly with Benares Hindu University, is currently honorary chairman of a voluntary organisation, Management and Resource Development Foundation, engaged in leadership skills development, technology transfer, and reduction in tobacco consumption (RTC) activities.

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