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Illegal Sheesha corners cropping up in Islamabad

By Kalbe Ali

ISLAMABAD, May 16: With rising demand for the 'elegant smoke' coming from the Chinese hooka, the number of restaurants and food courts offering 'Sheesha' is increasing in Rawalpindi. On the other hand, more illegal and private Sheesha corners are cropping up in the federal capital after the recent crackdown launched by the city administration and the Capital Development Authority (CDA).

The strict attitude of the city authorities with Sheesha will encourage other hard smokes which are more injurious to health, whereas the city managers claim they are only implementing the regulations of the country which are also applicable internationally such as ban on underage smoking, restriction on smoking in a closed environment without proper ventilation. Besides, there is a strange law in Pakistan which does not allow selling Sheesha to women.

"This is a strange regulation under which females cannot buy Sheesha but can have cigarettes," said Ms S, an executive at a multinational company in the federal

capital. "We occasionally smoke Sheesha in group for fun and pleasure. Now we have to take my husband or any colleague who might even be a non-smoker to buy us Sheesha."

Hukka, the traditional water pipe, has been in use in the region for centuries and even the rural women smoke it. While the trend of smoking among girls and women is rising in urban society unlike any other form of smoking or tobacco intake like pan, gutka etc., Sheesha has become the most controversial mode of smoking.

Those who are in favour of a complete ban on it say the smoke moving through the water of the hukka is equally hazardous. They even claim that Sheesha is up to 100 times more harmful than one cigarette. However, its users have a different version. "One has to understand that things do not become popular just for no reason. Ms S said: "Sheesha is not addictive and the impact of nicotine is very less than I have never felt dizziness or anything; this is a stylish way to enjoy time without much health risk."

She said even passive smokers

are happy with Sheesha smokers as the aromatic contents in the tobacco actually fill the whole surrounding with fragrance.

Out of more than 300 odd Sheesha corners in the capital, only 100-150 are operating in an undisclosed manner while a handful with licences operate at the jungle spot on way to Daman-i-Koh, Melody Food Street, Lakeview Park and a restaurant above Daman-i-Koh and five-star hotels.

Since preparing Sheesha is easy, many people have bought it for Rs300 to Rs3,000 depending on the size, decoration and quality of material used, while packs of tobacco are easily available in the twin cities.

The average charge for one Sheesha session is Rs250-Rs300, while at the higher side it reaches up to Rs800 depending on the location. Some of the private clubs even charge up to Rs1,800 per sitting.

While the rates range around Rs200 in Rawalpindi, smoking by females is less in most of the middle class localities in the city. However, it is becoming attractive among the youth and even the mid-level restaurants are begin-

ning to offer Sheesha to its customers.

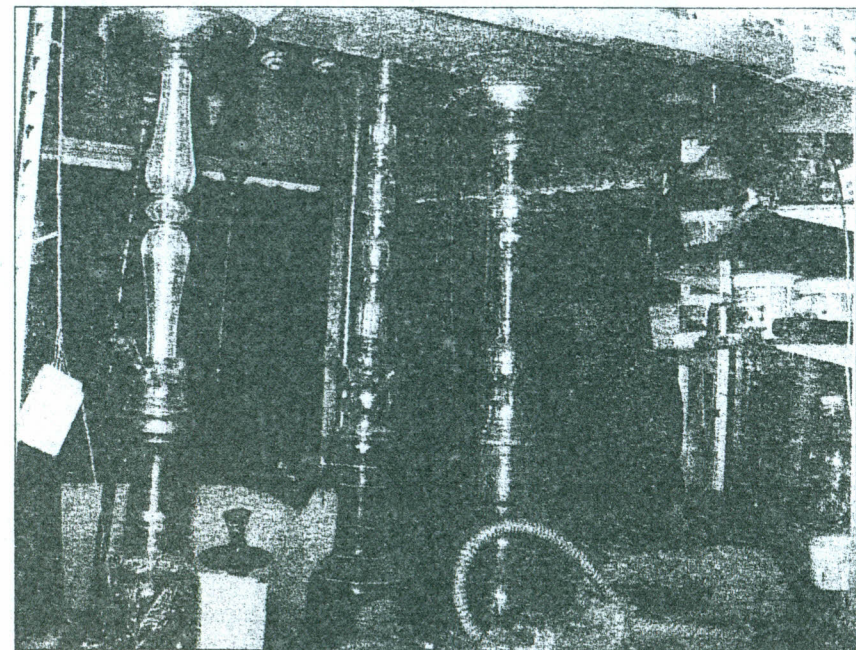
The most widely used Sheesha flavours are double apple and cigar in winters, whereas mint and grapes are preferred in summers.

"The nicotine content in Sheesha tobacco is less than one per cent, while that in cigarette is around 20 per cent," said Zia Chaudhry, who has been in the tobacco business for nine years and owns a Sheesha corner in Melody Food Park.

"Chain smokers and those used to hard brands of cigarette never like Sheesha due to its soft contents," he added.

Interestingly, smoking Sheesha is also becoming popular in the country due to its social acceptability compared to cigarettes and other forms of tobacco consumption.

"Almost all Sheesha tobacco is imported from UAE and one can read the contents at the packs which are more accurate compared to cigarettes being sold here as we do not even know if they are counterfeit," said Hammad Raza, a resident of Islamabad, who along with his cousins smoke Sheesha regularly.



ONE of the few licenced Sheesha shops in Islamabad. — Dawn