

Let us Fight Drugs and HIV/AIDS

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There are more than 45 million HIV-infected people in the world; nearly 32 million of those are in Africa, mostly sub-Saharan Africa. Approximately 14,000 new HIV infections occur daily around the world and this is an alarming call to the global society. Although prediction of AIDS in the world is not possible but it is estimated that the number of people likely to be living with HIV/AIDS by 2010 would be touching between 50-70 million cases.

The UN has predicted similar trends, estimating that China will leap upto 10 million cases of AIDS by 2010 and India will jump to 20-25 million cases. Similarly, Nigeria will have 10-15 million, Ethopia 7-10 million and Russian Federation will touch 5-8 million cases of AIDS by 2010. There were more than 1.2 million HIV/AIDS cases in USA and around 60,000 cases in Canada in 2006 which figure is likely to rise in the coming years.

It is evident that HIV/Aids has now set to become South Asia's biggest public health and 'Life-threatening challenge'. According to experts, 90 per cent of the 6 million people suffering from HIV / AIDS in India and likewise in Africa never knew that they had the virus until they were tested to be at an advanced stage.

The stigma around AIDS is very strong as sex and drugs are involved in it.

People suffering from HIV / AIDS face a number of challenges, including episodes of illness, transitional blames, abhorrence, financial difficulties, social isolation, side effects from medications and long-term effects from the virus.

I studied the menace of HIV/AIDS in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. Shame shrouding around the disease is the same every where in the world. It has been my personal experience that, about ten years ago, I was discouraged and dispirited by the number of religious and social organizations in Punjab (India), asking me not to talk about this evil in public. The community leaders at that time were under the wrong perception that talking about pre-marital, extra-marital sex and adultery in public was immoral and unethical

As a result of notional misunderstanding of philosophy, religions in the past denounced those who fell ill with the virus that causes AIDS. Such religious forerunners advocated that fate of the victims was divine punishment for their immoral behaviour. They believed that those who die of AIDS, will go direct to hell.

Surely, the followers at that time failed to understand the inner depth of the religious concepts. They forgot to conceptualize that service to sick, needy and vulnerable people was in fact the leading service to humanity and Almighty Lord. Inattentiveness of social and religious overlords provided little or no support or co-operation to people struggling against the disease due to the nature of its main modes of transmission, including sex and intravenous drug use. Instead of helping the needy people, even the political leaders used human beings either as a commodity or an object of political manipulation. However, the community activists working in the field of AIDS knew at that time that the main weapon in their battle would always be education and self-empowerment, but the kind of locked thinking by religious and political leaders

blocked the flow of information to people who really needed it.

Times and perceptions have changed rapidly. The world is burning. AIDS has become a major threat to life. Progressive people have now gained knowledge as to how the fatal disease would harm their homes, hearth, community, country and the world at large. To combat the menace of HIV/AIDS, enlightened men and women devoted in the service of their religious faith and political system have now understood that they have a role to play in helping the present and future victims of a dreaded epidemic. There is no denying the fact that spiritual and religious leaders hold considerable sway over the grass root masses. People have faith in them. The cooperation of these leaders to generate awareness about AIDS will be highly effective. At the same time, we know that the religious leaders have some reservations. Total abstinence from sex outside the sacred bond of marriage has to be advocated by them. It is good that they are idealistic but at the same time they need to be realistic too. If they want to focus on abstinence and fidelity while leaving condoms and harm-reduction to others, that is fine.

Religion provides us with important moral and ethical guidelines and supports us in addressing the day to-day problems mounting in society. Keeping in view the universal challenges thrown out by HIV/AIDS, the Jathedar of Sri Akal Takht Sahib (temporal and spiritual throne of the Sikhs) issued an appeal to the global people during the year 2006 to help curb the menace of AIDS in the world. The Jathedar also led the huge rally from Amritsar to Khadur Sahib (India) in which thousands of youth participated. Such constructive campaigns are needed to be organized by other religious and spiritual leaders to stem the transmission of HIV.

Although the AIDS problem is by no means limited to be dealt with by religious organizations only, but the role of religion in combating HIV/Aids can be most helpful when this menace is killing millions of religious and non-religious people alike over this earth. It is the duty of every one of us to avoid this painful, fatal and humiliating illness and to take obvious steps to prevent the worldwide catastrophe that has occurred. The public expects from the religio-influentials that they create awareness about AIDS in temples, Gurdwaras churches, mosques, worship places and synagogues. People listen and respect them because of their religious status in society and this will help human beings.

The majority of the youth between the ages of 15-24 years are most vulnerable to drugs and sexual anarchy. Academics, writers and social activists need to line up projects and find 'prevention strategies' in this respect by holding seminars, interactive workshops and producing literature by using the new technology with the help of the media. Their cooperation with HIV/AIDS workers will be highly effective in combating the most life consuming disease. However, it is not an easy answer or quick fix step. It requires an honest commitment of time, energy, thought and monetary help for which the rewards would be great for those who work with sincerity.

Human life is a gift of the Almighty Lord. Our sacred duty is to preserve it. Millions of Drug and AIDS ridden victims are succumbing to death every year while others are waiting for death. To save the new souls, religious heads and political leaders can play a constructive role by creating awareness about the importance of human beings in society. Social evils are serious issues to be dealt with in our societal order. The Sikhs have a universal treasure of principles relating to family life, married life, and sexuality. They have an extensive network

of people, institutions and infrastructure throughout world. This is the time for them to standup, contribute and rally to become a solid force to deal with these issues in society to save the burning world from the epidemic of Drugs and HIV / AIDS.

