



# Cultural Practice of Dental Health Among South Asians

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## Short Communication

Believe it or not, the art of dentistry or taking care of one's teeth has been established long before the original toothbrushes were made. The first use of toothbrushes was invented by the Chinese in the 15th to 16th century. The original toothbrush bristles consisted of animal hairs such as hog or bamboo, while its handle was of animal bone. From there it has been ever since evolving and changing to the very plastic and nylon bristles toothbrush that is in use currently. However, the very first use of cleaning teeth was reported in 3500 B.C. among ancient Babylonians. The method they used to clean their teeth was from twigs of aromatic trees. They chewed on one side of the twig while it became like a brush and then brushed their teeth as it removed bad odor simultaneously from the mouth. The other end was pointed where the Babylonians would use it as a primitive form of floss to remove food that was stuck amongst the teeth. The twigs were reported to be as big as a pencil. A very similar concept that is actually common today and heavily practiced is the use of Miswak. The miswaks are made from the twigs of the *Salvadora persica* tree that is common in regions of Africa and the Middle East. This tree has actually been recommended for dental hygiene and recognized as a global health phenomenon by the World Health Organization (WHO). Currently the use of miswak is heavily still practiced today among the Muslim and the South Asian populations. This concept however was initially preconceived among the Arabs around 600 AD and possible even before.

As Islam became prominent, the use of miswak spread as well, reaching areas such as India, Bangladeshi, and Pakistan. The miswak has a religious significance on the Muslims as the Prophet Muhammad (may peace and blessings be upon him) said "Were it not for fear of overburdening my people, I would have ordered them to brush their teeth with Siwak (Miswak) at every Salat." What this quote means is that if it were not difficult for the people, Prophet

Muhammad (may peace and blessings be upon him) would have told his people to brush their teeth every time before prayers. Muslims pray five times a day, meaning if this was a religious obligation, they then would have brushed their teeth five times a day! Even though this was not an obligation, the fact there is emphasis on it being five times a day, shows how dental hygiene and cleanliness is important to Muslims. There are other multiple sayings and narrations as well on the emphasis on dental health in Islam. Hence why this practice is common among the Muslim South Asians today.

Doctor Hossam El Zuhery, a dentist and a Muslim as well, at Exquisite Family Dentistry was interviewed and asked about his opinion based on his experience and expertise. "The miswak was the dental tool available back then. In my humble opinion, if I were to recommend between the two, I would choose the toothbrush as it is more advanced. Miswak was what was available back then but the emphasis was on dental hygiene not an obligation on using the miswak. It is like choosing the option to light your room, but you would choose the bulb over the candle," stated Dr. Zuhery. As Dr. Zuhery expressed that use of miswak is not a religious obligation but just the emphasis on cleaning one's teeth. He has experience and resided in Saudi Arabia where he encountered numerous patients with the use of miswak as opposed to current toothbrushes. "Back then life was simpler, as the food back then was not filled with so much processed sugar. There was no soda back then. They had simple food such as fruits, dates, and etc. Because today's food is sugarier, we require tougher tools to deal with it." He explains that in Saudi Arabia, the patients that used just miswak, had still decaying teeth and were not perfectly clean as they would have been if they were to use the toothpaste and toothbrush. On the other hand, there have been results and statistics where miswak has been just as effective as a toothbrush. A study conducted in Lucknow, India showed that young students that used miswak

or toothbrush, had low gingival recession and low dental plaque as those who used ordinary toothbrushes. If anything, the use of miswak is more advocated due to its inexpensive and easy ability to distribute as opposed to the plastic and non-environment friendly plastic toothbrush.

Although currently, miswak is a religious and cultural practice for Muslim and South Asians, it's use is slowly being less practiced. The new generations are more prone to utilizing the new technology

while often the older generation still use it. It is very rare to be found among South Asians in the Western countries. If anything, it is commonly practiced among South Asian migrants or in their native homes. Even though both the miswak and toothbrush have pros and cons, they both excel in taking care of teeth. If anything, the miswak should be modified and distributed due to its economic and environment friendly style. It can greatly help and reduce many dental diseases and help improve the overall care of it.