

Consumption of gutka on decline in India, say health ministry and WHO

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The consumption of tobacco products is in decline in India, according to the Ministry of Health And Family Welfare and WHO (World Health Organization). Between 2009 and 2016, India has made progress in reducing the prevalence of use of both smoked and smokeless forms of tobacco. However, concern about gutka remains.

Despite the Centre imposing ban on sale of gutkha, the ground reality is different. Illegal, unauthorised production of gutkha is still prevalent in the country and ban has not worked in many states. There is still illegal or unauthorised or clandestine production of gutkha.

India has a comprehensive tobacco control act, Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution) Act (COTPA) since 2003. Initially, the Act had already been successfully implemented by imposing harsh penalty for selling of/by tobacco to minors and prohibition of tobacco sale within 100 yards of any educational institute, while, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), under FSS Regulations, prohibited manufacture, sale and distribution of pan masala with tobacco and or nicotine as active ingredient; but this was not maintained in some states and UTs despite notifications.

There were frictions as well between FSSR and COTPA, as to who shall prevail in order to regulate the tobacco and related products.

Dr Indranil Saha, professor, department of community medicine, IQ City Medical College, Durgapur, West Bengal, says, "In spite of having stringent rules, authorities failed to maintain the vigilance part, which is of utmost importance in maintaining the war against tobacco."

Recently in the month of October, Punjab extended the ban on manufacture, storage, sale or distribution of gutkha, pan masala (containing tobacco or nicotine), processed/flavoured/scented chewing tobacco and any other food products containing tobacco or nicotine as an ingredient, for a period of one year.

The law will be applicable to all these products irrespective of the packaging and/or if they are sold as one product or packaged as separate products available in the market, according to the Food Safety and Standards (Prohibition and Restrictions on Sales) Regulations, 2011.

Maharashtra government in the month of March put the ban on the sale of gutkha and

made it a non-bailable offence. Punishment for the offence would be enhanced to three years in prison, the government said.

Meanwhile, most other states in the country, during the last few years, have been imposing ban on gutkha under the said norms for a year and according it further extensions.

India is the third-largest tobacco producing nation and second-largest consumer of tobacco world-wide. The government's regulatory action towards tobacco control began in 2003 with the enactment of COTPA. India is also been one of the earliest nations to ratify the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) in 2004.

All forms of tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship are prohibited. It is mandatory to have pictorial and text health warning labels on the tobacco product packages. On October 15, 2014, the government notified new larger warnings that increased the warning size from 40 per cent of one side of tobacco product packaging to 85 per cent of both front and back panels of tobacco packaging.

In India, large-scale prevalence is noticed across different states/UTs from 64.5 per cent in Tripura to 9.7 per cent in Goa. While some states have been successful in achieving decline in tobacco use prevalence, others need to undertake more concerted efforts for effective tobacco control. The current levels of tobacco use are still very high across the nation which calls for sustained efforts at all levels and multisectoral coordination to bring down tobacco use across all sections of the population.

In view of this, J P Nadda, Minister of Health and Family Welfare, had mentioned that under the National Health Policy, 2017, the government set a target of relative reduction of tobacco use by 15 per cent by 2020 and 30 per cent by 2025.

However, Saha of IQ City Medical College, stated, "MOHFW of India has implemented introduction of new graphic health warnings covering 85% of the principal display area on all tobacco product packages on both sides from April 1, 2016. This warning will be repeated after 12 months. But in my opinion it will not serve its own purpose. Various pictures must be displayed simultaneously, for example in one batch many packets will be having different warning pictures and text. Otherwise one single picture for one year will not create a strong impact to displace the mind of the tobacco users. Again the time has come to go for plain packaging. Evidences around the world have also demonstrated its usefulness in curbing the tobacco use."