

If Madhya Pradesh Can Ban Chewing Tobacco Products, then why not Assam?



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Steadfast in its commitment to safeguard the health of its citizens from the menace of chewing tobacco products, the Government of Madhya Pradesh from April 1, 2012 onwards has banned the sale and manufacture of products like Gutka, Khaini & other chewing tobacco products based on the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) regulation no 2.3.4 to prohibit the addition of tobacco or nicotine in food (and thereby banning Gutka) which was issued on 1st August, 2011.

With this, MP has become the first state to use the FSSAI regulation to ban the sale and manufacture of products like gutka. The only other Indian state that has banned gutka is Goa but it has done so since many years, on the basis of a state public health law.

On 1 August 2011, The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), a statutory body under the health ministry to handle food related issues, notified new regulations called the Food Safety and Standards (Prohibition and Restrictions on Sales) Regulations, 2011. It states under rule 2.3.4 that “product not to contain any substance which may be injurious to health: Tobacco and nicotine shall not be used as ingredients in any food products”.

This amendment is also in the existing law of Prevention of Food Adulteration rules 1955 under Rule 44-J. Since Gutka and chewing tobacco have been considered as food by various courts it bans the said item as no food item can have tobacco and nicotine as its ingredient.

According to Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS) India, the estimated number of tobacco users in India is 274.9 million of which 25.9% are users of smokeless tobacco while 5.7% are cigarette smokers and 9.2% smoke bidi. This reveals that more Indians (almost 75%) consume smokeless forms of tobacco that includes pan, gutka, pan masala and khaini, mawa. Slowly and gradually the use of chewing tobacco is reaching at dangerously endemic levels in the country with 8% of all adults in the country chewing gutka.

Prevalence of Tobacco Use in Assam:

39.3% adults (52.6% of males and 25.3% of females) currently use some form of tobacco

32.7% adults (39.8% of males and 25.3% of females) currently consume smokeless tobacco like gutka, khaini, zarda & other chewing tobacco products

8.8% of adults (17.0% of males and 0.1% of females) currently consume cigarettes

5.3% of adults (10.2% of males and 0.1% of females) currently consume bidi's.

Average age at initiation of tobacco use: 19.0 years in adults, 19.2 years in males, and 16.2 years in females.

India has the highest prevalence of oral cancer globally, with 75, 000 to 80, 000 new cases of oral cancers in a year. Gutka sold in small pouches across the country has become a very serious health hazard. Easy availability and low prices makes it popular amongst youth and women. Due to its flavored taste, easy availability and low price as well as the attractive marketing ploy by the companies, it is becoming increasingly popular among children as well. In fact Gutkha use is becoming an alternative choice in India as our culture and traditions do not give children and women the social sanction to smoke cigarettes.

“By banning gutkha, the MP Government has demonstrated tremendous commitment towards safe guarding the health of people of India and protecting the masses, especially the youth from the growing menace of tobacco addiction. The Government of Assam too should implement the FSSAI law in larger interest of younger generation in the state who is falling prey to this tobacco menace and suffer premature death”, said Ruchira Neog, Executive Secretary, Voluntary Health Association of Assam (VHAA).

A recent report released by the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) shows that 7% of the contents of an average gutkha packet is magnesium carbonate, which is used by the gutkha manufacturing companies as an anti-caking agent. Seven percent is a very high amount. It can cause irritation of the mucosa, eyes, fingers, anything that it comes in contact with. There is magnesium carbonate in the common salt, but the quantity is minuscule. If ingested in the high amount present in gutkha packets, it can cause ulcers.

The Government of India has been pushed to act on this issue by the civil society that has been pressing for a ban on smokeless tobacco products. The Directors of 16 Regional Cancer Centre's in India individually wrote letters to the Prime Minister in April 2011 and highlighted the issue of the rising number of cancers in the head and neck region in the states they serve due to smokeless tobacco consumption. These cancer centres were from Mumbai and Nagpur in Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Tripura, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Kerala.

Oral cancer victims from across the country have also come together to start “Voices of Tobacco Victims” (VOTV), a national campaign to advocate against chewing tobacco and other smokeless forms and promote greater awareness about the harmful effects of tobacco use and for appealing for stronger enforcement of tobacco control laws and the complete ban of chewing tobacco in the country. On the behest of VOTV, 13 Chief Ministers including the Chief Minister of Assam have pledged their support to curb this growing menace in their states and so have various members of parliament and political leaders in various central and state ministers.

Ruchira Neog

Voluntary Health Association of Assam

editor

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