

## Tobacco – License to kill?

Tobacco has been chewed in India for centuries, dating back to the Mughal era when Nawabs had a concoction known as *Paan* – a betel leaf wrapped around a mixture of areca nut paste, catechu, spices tobacco, etc., used to refresh their palate and aid digestion. Gutka and pan masala are products of recent time available as dry portable and readymade variants of the traditional pan to cater for a fast paced modern life. Gutka is an adulterated version of the PAN MASALA in which tobacco is added to the masala.

The menace of Gutka is much more than one could imagine. It is dreadful to know that Gutka is even more expensive than almonds. But those who consume it never realize this and move toward a path of self destruction from which there is no return. People are well aware of the deterrent and disastrous effects of narcotics but still they indulge in this life threatening habit. Tobacco kills more people than acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), legal drugs, illegal drugs, road traffic accidents, murders, and suicides. Tobacco kills half of its all lifetime users. No other product is as risky or kills as many people. Half of them die in their middle age, between 35 and 69 years. Tobacco kills more men in the developing countries than in the industrialized countries and it is likely that the deaths among women will soon be the same.

India, Asia's third largest economy battles almost 80000 new cases of oral cancer yearly. The treatment of tobacco-related diseases costs more than USD 5 billion in 2002–2003 as compared with USD 1.4 billion that the Government earns in excise revenue from tobacco. It is estimated that 65 million Indians use Gutka, a handy form of chewing tobacco made of crushed betel nut, nicotine, and laced with thousands of chemicals. Tobacco kills more than 70000 to one million Indians every year, most of them are dying due to mouth cancer.



In lieu of all this, 10 Indian states have banned this popular form of chewing tobacco in a major policy shift that may save life of millions and strike a blow as the global tobacco industry is already reeling from new antismoking laws around the world. However, various manufacturers are fighting to overturn the bans so imposed by the governments. Gutka making is controlled by family run Indian firms while there are no international tobacco companies in this business. All these companies are making claims that they are giving employment and adding to the economy of the country. Hence, they should be allowed to continue in their business, but they do not understand the havoc these products create by claiming innocent lives and risking the lives of the Indian youth, society, and nation.

It is pleasing to note that citing public interest and health, Bombay High Court refused to stay the Maharashtra Government decision to ban on manufacturing, sale and storage of pan masala and Gutka. The ban on Gutka and pan masala was imposed through a notification on July 19 under the Food Safety and Standard Act (FSSA). But it remains to be seen how well the bans are being enforced. Strong policies and programs for tobacco control in consultation with tobacco victims are essential to put an end on this life threatening habit.

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