

## Fire without smoke: on chewable tobacco consumption

A report from the World Health Organisation on the occasion of World No Tobacco Day (May 31) suggests that India's efforts to cut the prevalence of cigarette smoking are paying off. Between 2000 and 2015, this fell from 19.4% to 11.5%. By 2025, the report projected, it could drop to 8.5%, putting India well in line to meeting its 2025 target under a WHO global plan to tackle non-communicable diseases. While this is excellent news, it needs to be highlighted that smokeless tobacco is the bigger scourge in the country. The WHO report doesn't model usage trends in this segment because of the paucity of global data. Other data, however, suggest that India is lagging on this front. Even though there is a 2011 government ban on the sale of food items with tobacco or nicotine in them, the consumption of gutkha, khaini and zarda continues to be rampant. The Global Adult Tobacco Survey in 2016, for example, found that 29.6% of Indian men and 12.8% of Indian women were users. Children are victims of this lethal addiction too. The WHO report noted that 7.9 million adolescents, between 13 and 15 years, used [smokeless tobacco](#) in the South-East Asian region. Given that 66% of the world's smokeless-tobacco users are in India, a sizeable chunk of this number would be Indian teenagers. Against this background, the drop in cigarette smoking rates gives India little cause to celebrate.

Gutkha and other [chewable tobacco](#) items are equally, if not more, harmful compared to cigarettes. Surveys show that these products are sometimes mixed with carcinogenic compounds called nitrosamines. This is why India banned their sale under the 2011 Food Safety and Standards Regulations. Why do they continue to be consumed, then? Experts blame their availability on loopholes in the law. The food safety rules target pre-mixed tobacco products, such as gutkha, which contains lime, sugar and other spices. This leaves unflavoured items, such as khaini or surthi, out of regulatory purview. Meanwhile, mislabelling of smokeless tobacco is common. Even when a product contains tobacco, it is passed off as being tobacco-free. Worse, one of the tactics of the tobacco industry is to use flavours such as cardamom and saffron to attract youngsters, triggering life-long addiction. The WHO report notes that as cigarette usage has fallen in high-income countries, the tobacco industry has targeted younger users to make up for the revenue shortfall. While this trend applies to smoking, there is evidence that children are also a target of the chewable tobacco industry. With its war against smoking seemingly on the right track, India must turn its focus to the smokeless tobacco segment. The challenge is bigger, but so will be the reward.

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