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Mukesh Harane –The identified life

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Mukesh Harane died of oral cancer in October 2009. He was addicted to gutka. After his death he became the face of the anti-tobacco message which was delivered to the people of this country through an audio-visual clip as well as in print campaign.

The AV clip was fairly disturbing. It has been argued that it could have been less gruesome, nevertheless it managed to convey the ill-effects of consuming gutka very well. It showed Mukesh talking about the ill-effects of eating gutka, with feeding pipe going into his nose.

As per the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS) released in October 2010, 26% of Indian adults (33% of males and 18% of females) consumed khaini, gutka, pan masala and other smokeless forms of tobacco, daily.

According to a September 2013 report by the International Tobacco Control Project (ITCP), by 2020 tobacco consumption will lead to more than 1.5 million deaths per year in India. What these numbers clearly tell us is that the consumption of tobacco particularly in the oral/smokeless form is seriously injurious to health. Nevertheless, despite these numbers, it was the audio-visual clip featuring Mukesh that really drove this point home. And there are lessons that can be learnt from this. But before we get into that I would like to quote Thomas Schelling, who won the Nobel Prize in economics in 2005.

As Schelling writes in *Choice and Consequence: Perspectives of an Errant Economist*: "Let a six-year-old girl with brown hair need thousands of dollars for an operation that will prolong her life until Christmas, and the post office will be swamped with nickels and dimes to save her. But let it be

reported that without a sales tax the hospital facilities of Massachusetts will deteriorate and cause a barely perceptible increase in preventable deaths—not many will drop a tear or reach for their checkbooks."

Schelling came up with this example to essentially distinguish between a "statistical life" and an "identified life". The sick girl dying is an identified life whereas the people dying in hospitals are "merely" statistical lives because we do not know who they are. Hence, people are ready to donate money in order to save an identified life, but do nothing about the statistical one.

As behavioural economist Richard H Thaler writes in his new book *Misbehaving—The Making of Behavioural Economics*: "We rarely allow an identified life to be extinguished solely for the lack of money... thousands of "unidentified" people die every day for lack of simple things like mosquito nets, vaccines, or clean water."

How is this linked to the campaign featuring Harane that I talked about earlier? Mukesh as a victim of gutka consumption was an "identified life" and given that the campaign featuring him really worked and touched a raw nerve. It showed very clearly how dangerous eating gutka can turn out to be.

It also explains why many government campaigns which simply highlight data do not just work at all because they do not have an identified life in them. As Thaler points out: "Unlike the sick girl, the typical domestic public policy decision is abstract. It lacks emotional impact."

There is a lesson in this for the public campaigns that the Indian government government runs. The lesson also applies for organisations working in the social sector. For campaigns in areas like health, education or population control for that matter, to be successful, it is very important that they have an identified life in them. Don't give people just data—give them a story as well.

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