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Rajasthan wins WHO award for highest VAT on tobacco products

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JAIPUR: Imposing highest Value Added Tax (VAT) on tobacco products in the country has earned Rajasthan a 2014 World No Tobacco Day Award in the South-East Asia Region.

The state had won the award last year too for its efforts in the area of tobacco control such as research, capacity building, promotion of policy or legislation and advocacy to enhance tobacco control.

It is the second consecutive year when the World Health Organisation (WHO) recognized efforts of the state in the area of tobacco control.

There were five World No Tobacco Day 2014 Awards apart from appreciation awards. India bagged two of the five awards, one for Rajasthan and other for Maharashtra. The other three awardees were Bangladesh, Thailand and Nepal.

The WHO appreciated the work done by Department of Finance, Government of Rajasthan. The state finance department hiked the VAT unprecedentedly to discourage tobacco consumption. "Rajasthan has the highest VAT on tobacco products in the country," tobacco control, nodal officer, Dr Sunil Singh said.

In the past four years, VAT on tobacco products in state has been increased. Before 2010-11, the VAT was 12.5%. But in 2010-11, it increased to 20%. In 2011-12, the VAT almost doubled to 40%. It reached 50% in 2011-12 and in 2013-14, the VAT shot up to a steep 65%.

WHO estimates that by increasing tobacco taxes by 50%, all countries would reduce the number of smokers by 49 million within the next three years and ultimately save 11 million lives.

According to WHO, price increases are two-three times more effective in reducing tobacco use among young people than among older adults. High prices are particularly effective in discouraging young people (with limited income) from taking up smoking. And they encourage young smokers to reduce tobacco use or give it up altogether.

Narendra Singh, state consultant of National Tobacco Control Programme, WHO India Tobacco Free Initiative/MoHFW, Rajasthan, said, "High taxes always encourage the users to give up tobacco consumption. Rajasthan has been doing it consistently over the past few years. But, it will be more fruitful if the neighbouring states too follow suit."

In 2013, the directorate of medical and health services (DMHS) and city-based oncologist Dr Rakesh Gupta were also among the five recipients of WHO award for their efforts in tobacco control.

Notably, in 2012-13, the state government had taken initiatives to control tobacco consumption including imposing a ban on gutkha, introduced first helpline 104 for free counseling for tobacco users who want to quit tobacco consumption, apart from providing free medicines.

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