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## Tobacco Lobbyists, Politicians Must Clean Up Their Act

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These days I have made the acquaintance of a new kind of Indian. One whose lungs are totally resistant to cigarettes and beedis. In fact, according to a certain MP from Allahabad, smoking causes “nil” effects on the human respiratory system; and yet there is the factual data that does not add up to these bold statements—one million people die of tobacco every year, and according to experts of the National Institute of Health and Family Welfare, India records 86 per cent of the global oral cancer cases, caused primarily by tobacco.

However, these days we protest any survey, especially if it is done by scientists abroad. We in India believe that Indians have a different and more evolved immune system. So what if the rest of the world is dying from tobacco addiction, we in India are not affected! Why don't we all light up? Let us ignore all statistics and warnings, against cancer or tuberculosis—the malaise of Bengal, where emaciated rickshaw pullers puff on beedis and then cough up blood. Recent findings in Allahabad have rubbished scientific facts!

The truth of the matter is that the beedi barons are mostly politicians and there is a very strong nexus promoting this kind of propaganda. “The tobacco lobby is one of the strongest in the world,” said Ambumani Ramadoss at an NDA rally recently. For once, Ramadoss is

not alone in this war for even the prime minister has tweeted that tobacco is bad for health. However, despite this, the health ministry is dragging its feet on re-notifying increased space for pictorial warning on packets.

While I may mull over whether writing “Smoking is dangerous for health” and printing gory pictures of infected lungs on cigarette packets actually dissuade people from smoking, I certainly have no doubt that a minister endorsing smoking is totally unethical.

I’m often left wondering why instead of banning Leslee Udwin’s documentary India’s Daughter on gang rape or removing the word “lesbian” from Dum Laga Ke Haisha, our politicians never ban the sale of cigarettes, beedis and gutka. I would ideally like to ban cigarettes altogether, but let’s be realistic, what would the tobacco lobbies do for their income then?

What we do need is a comprehensive survey, done in India by Indians, on the ill-effects of tobacco to shut up the pro-smoking lobby and put a lid on this absurd fiction and propaganda. As it is, there is enough pollution in the national capital which indicates that by 35 most of Delhi’s youth will have “smoker’s lungs”! We, as a government, should at least not be adding to it.

And finally, a very disturbing trend is children’s easy access to cigarettes, beedis and gutka. While recently shopping with a friend a little boy at a local kirana store ordered a litre of milk, two packets of Maggi and one packet of Gold Flake cigarettes. The man at the store glowered at him: “Don’t you know it’s illegal to give cigarettes to children?” “It’s for my daddy,” said the boy boldly. “Indeed!” said the man handing him the cigarettes.

At roadside paan-beedi shops this conversation would not even happen. Children buy cigarettes all the time and when they can’t afford it, a packet of gutka comes for just `5 or `10. India’s lion share of global oral cancer cases can be attributed primarily to the consumption of the cheap, affordable drug called gutka paan masala—laced with tobacco and the acacia betel nut, packaged attractively and advertised blatantly as chaini khaini on bus hoardings. Ban this instead is all I say to politicians; clean up your act before it’s too late.

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