

What ban? Gutka still sells

TNN | Jun 18, 2012, 05:08 AM IST

PATNA: Bihar became third state in the country to ban the sale, distribution and manufacture of gutka and paan masala containing nicotine on May 31 with immediate effect. However, while the administration gears up to put a system in place to effectively implement the order, these products are still being sold in a clandestine manner. Food safety commissioner cum health secretary Sanjay Kumar said raids would be conducted regularly from the coming week.

He said, "There are 22 state food safety officers and teams comprising police personnel would be formed under them. They would conduct raids in their respective areas across the state to stop both the organized and unorganized sector from manufacturing, storing, selling or distributing paan masala and gutka. "On the seizure of these products, the department would register cases against them. As per the Act, on the guilt being proved, a fine up to Rs 3 lakh can be slapped or imprisonment for one year could be awarded," he added.

Gutka and other tobacco products worth Rs 3 lakh were seized at Khagaria on June 1 in the only raid conducted so far in the state. Khagaria SP Mithoo Prasad said, "We conducted the raid on June 1 and seized 20 sacks of 'Madhur' brand gutka worth around Rs 3 lakh. The wholesaler was arrested."

However, the stakeholders call for more effective implementation of the ban. Deepak Mishra, executive director of Socio-Economic and Education Development Society, which has been working to make Bihar tobacco-free for long, said mere announcement would not prove to be deterrent for the distributors. "One does not find paan masala or gutka being sold in open, but they are available in black. The only difference is they are now available at inflated prices," he said

Distributors have also changed their modus operandi. Mishra claimed, "Instead of bringing their consignment to Patna railway station, they are getting it at nearby Fatuha, Mokama or Danapur stations. Moreover, I came to know that last time when a raid was conducted at a prime location of the city, the products went underground before the officials reached there." He added teams under 22 food safety officers would not be able to keep a tab on such a huge sector and an awareness drive to enforce

the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA) that prohibits consumption of tobacco products at public places is needed.

A paan masala consumer on the condition of anonymity said, "When I go to the shop from where I regularly used to buy it, the shopkeeper now gives it to me at an inflated price."

A former paan masala distributor, who did not wish to be quoted, said, "The distributors may resort to illegal ways to continue the sale of gutka and paan masala, packing them with other unbanned tobacco products." He claimed the daily sale of gutka in Patna is worth Rs 2.5 crore and that of paan masala is about Rs 3 crore.

Bihar has had a dismal record in tobacco control. According to a survey, 54% population of the state consumes tobacco. Mahavir Cancer Sansthan director J K Singh said, "Out of total cancer cases, 41% cases are of oral cancer. Of them, 96% cases are of cancer caused by tobacco. The consumption of tobacco not only causes oral and lung cancer, but also leads to heart and oesophagus-related problems."