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Gutkha banned from today, traders bet on paan

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Written by Express News Service



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My daily gutkha sale is around Rs 2,500. I sell some 600 small and big packets per day. Most of us stored it expecting bulk buying before Tuesdays ban, but it has not happened. Though for the past two days we haven't refreshed gutkha supplies, we are still left with some stock in hand, said Patel, adding that wholesale prices of various gutkha brands have dropped by Rs 15 to 20 in the last two days.

The ban on gutkha in Gujarat, announced by the chief minister at his Independence Day speech and followed up with a notification by the Food Safety Commissioner on August 28, will come into effect on September 11, outlawing the manufacture, storage, distribution or sale of gutkha or pan masala that contains either tobacco or nicotine or their loose ingredients for one year.

Gujarat, a major producer of tobacco with an output of 2.8 lakh tonnes in 2010-11 alone, will be the seventh state to effect such a ban.

Meanwhile, the one-month gap between announcement and actual ban has helped most traders adjust their businesses, and the proprietors of almost all large pan shop owners say the ban may have little impact on businesses.

The proprietor of a pan shop on Ahmedabads busy Judges Bungalow Road said he stopped keeping stock more than two to three weeks ago when news of the ban spread, as did his partners, all of whom together run three such shops selling everything from pan and gutkha to deodorant and chocolates.

On an average, we used to sell up to 1,000 packets of gutkha each month, each packet having 60 pouches or so in it. We earned about Rs 10 to Rs 15 in profit from every packet. It's a small dent in business, but at least our main sales are from normal paan, he said, adding customers who used to consume gutkha are now increasingly switching to paan.

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A Surat-based distributor of Vimal gutkha, one of the most popular brands across the state, said pan stall owners sell a minimum five packets (each containing 60 pouches) of Vimal daily. Each packet comes to the distributor at Rs 78, who resells it to stall owners at Rs 80 per packet.

Zatpat, Manikchand and other branded gutkhas have fewer customers, although Manikchand is said to be popular among the more affluent in Gujarati society. A single packet of 60 pouches costs Rs 320, although distributors sell it to small shopkeepers at Rs 325 to Rs 336 as per demand.

These business transactions are theoretically to stop from Tuesday, but many traders are hoping they may be able to circumvent the ban.

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Tobacco lovers have many other options available like faki (mixture of tobacco and beetle nut with flavors) made by local paan shops and even branded tobacco, said Jignesh Patel, a paan shop-owner in Rajkot, expecting the ban may boost sales of faki, on which the profit margin is almost 50 per cent compared to 20 to 30 per cent on gutkha.

At the receiving end of the ban apparently will only be the small paan cabin owners. Our business is mainly around gutkha sale and not on paan masala or faki. I am likely to lose my 50 per cent of gutkha business, said Suresh Koil,a small-time paanwala from Rajkot.

Doctors welcome the ban

Meanwhile,doctors and academics researching public health trends had a cautious praise for the ban,which they welcomed because some state-run facilities get as many as 25,000 new cancer patients (most tobacco consumers) each year.

The state government has endorsed findings that more than a third of Gujaratis consume tobacco,one-fourth of whom use smokeless tobacco like pan masala and gutkha.

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Those who welcomed the ban also warned that the gutkha ban may go the way of alcohol prohibition,fattening the black market and a bombardment of spurious products.

Addicts look for ways to beat the ban

Addicts,on the other hand,gave mixed responses.

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Rajkot-based Bhavesh Lunagaria,25,said the ban might finally help him kick the habit,something he could not do all these years. I think will power and ban will help, he said.

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Tahir Ansari, a resident of Surat, said, For the last 10 years, I have been addicted to gutkha. I eat 20 sachets of gutkha in a day. Without it, I cannot concentrate on my work. Now, I am worried. I will have to find out about a black market or else I will go for tobacco-mixed betel leaf.

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