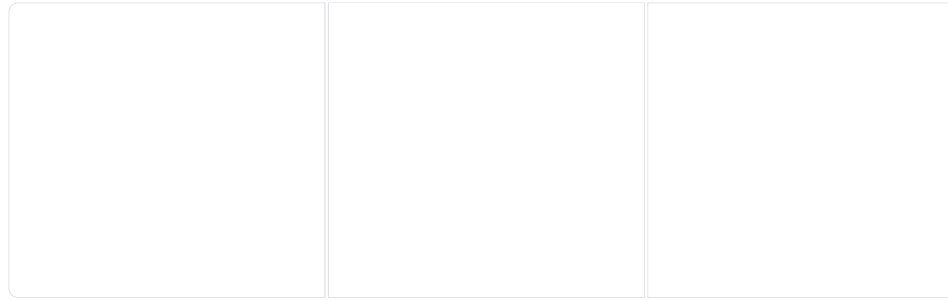


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## Hookah barred?

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The sonorous gurgle of the hookah, music to the ears of tobacco addicts and indeed the occasional smoker ever keen for that exotic experience, may soon fall silent in the city.

The hookah habit, which the city has nurtured over the years despite its apparent conflict with 'bhadralok' sensibilities, has always been a health concern. The Kolkata Police now wants to deal with the threat decisively and is exploring legal options to crack down on the handful of hookah bars scattered across the city and several more in its suburbs as well as Howrah. An exact count of the hookah bars is not available with the civic authorities. The police is now creating a database of all hookah bars in the city. Though officials said it was unlikely that such bars had a huge turnover, the proposed crackdown drew howls of protest from hookah bar regulars - mostly youths, and a large number among them teenaged girls, and businessmen - who wondered why they were being targeted when people continued to flout anti-smoking smoking laws with impunity.

But the police move may yet be stalled by red tape and a familiar pass-the-buck habit.

Kolkata Police commissioner R K Pachnanda has written to mayor Sovan Chatterjee, saying trade licenses issued to hookah bars must be scrapped as they sell tobacco in violation of the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (Copta), 2003 and the Prohibition of Smoking in Public Places Rules, 2008. In the letter, written about a month back, Pachnanda argues that according to provisions of Copta, the police (as the implementing agency) can only slap only a Rs 200 fine on those flouting laws. The KMC, he feels, can do much more and scrap the trade licenses of the hookah bars. The letter came close on the heels of a meeting between the mayor, Pachnanda and the KMC commissioner.

Trade licenses that are issued currently by the KMC don't incorporate provisions of the Copta. The KMC says that in a trade license, the nature of the trade has to be mentioned. A hookah bar doesn't figure in it, and therefore, the KMC can't take action. A typical hookah bar in the city is also a restaurant and would, therefore, have a food license. "We issue trade licenses; they are not for hookah bars," the mayor says. "If the police want to initiate action, they can go ahead." As a result, Pachnanda's letter has gathered dust for over a month.

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But KK Pati, the state health department's nodal officer for tobacco, backs the police. "It is true that the penal provisions in Copta aren't enough. It would be a good idea if the KMC can check if the licenses given to food joints are being misused. If they are, they can act," Pati says.

SK Khullar, former president of the Federation of Hotels and Restaurants Association of India, advises caution. "Any such action to scrap trade licenses without properly ascertaining whether they are selling tobacco or not will be unfair. To my knowledge, none of them actually sell tobacco," Khullar says.

When ToI visited a Wood Street hookah bar on Monday, the faint lights coupled with woodworked interiors in a cramped space (only three tables were spread out) were hidden behind a smoke screen. Several couples and groups of friends passed the mouthpiece around. The paanmsala flavour seemed to be the favourite. Manager Ranjan Pandey said the bar doesn't sell tobacco. Other hookah bar-owners TOI spoke also claimed they use molasses, and sometimes aromatic compounds, but never tobacco. Pandey insisted no rules were flouted and customers were only allowed to enter if they showed valid identity proof.

Deepak Das, ACP in the detective department's anti-narcotics cell, rubbishes the no-tobacco claims. "The hookah bars can't claim they sell only molasses or other aromatic substances and not nicotine. The material sold has a specified nicotine content," he says. The police also say the hookah bars don't stop people below 18 from entering their premises as they eye higher revenue. Among the hookah bar regulars TOI spoke to were school students and 16-year-olds, backing the police theory.

Cancer Foundation of India (CFI) executive director Sutapa Biswas welcomed the police plan to root out the hookah menace. "In 2009, the police had taken penal action against a south Kolkata restobar. But it has to be done more frequently to make the law a visible deterrent," Biswas says, adding, "Smoking is banned in public places. Restaurants also fall within its ambit, apart from those that house over 30 people and have designated smoking zones. Even this comes will a lot of stipulations. Needless to say, these are flouted regularly." Biswas seconded the police assertion that

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the penal provisions weren't enough. "But on this context, I would like to highlight the move taken in Mumbai. They amended their license laws to stop such hookah bars."

Joydeep Biswas, director of the Chittaranjan National Cancer Institute, director, says the whole argument over whether hookah bars actually sell nicotine or not is unnecessary as smoking is anyway a health hazard. "Smoking in any form is harmful. Even if they don't sell nicotine, anything that burns will lead to formation of carbondioxide or carbon monoxide. The lungs have only a stipulated capacity. And I feel, other than health-related effects, it also creates a physiological dependency - that of addiction. And if you are speaking of young people, this will be even more. This should be stopped," he says.

It isn't that everyone is waiting for a legal notice before taking the hookah off the counter. Not too long ago, one could take a drag of the hookah at Cafe Coffee Day outlets in the city. "We stopped it three to four years back. We didn't want to create an unhealthy atmosphere where families would be uncomfortable," CCD, president-marketing, K Ramakrishnan says. Sources say another popular hookah bar in south Kolkata may also down its shutters soon. The reason - dipping clientele.

(With inputs from Subhro Niyogi and Sumati Yengkhom)

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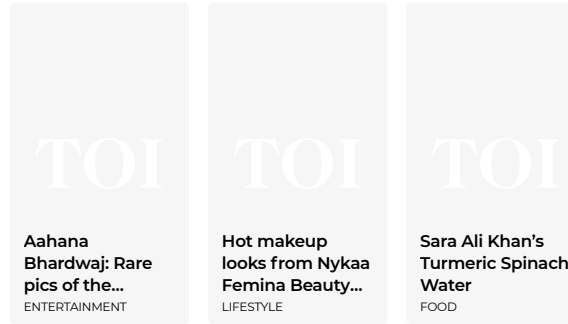
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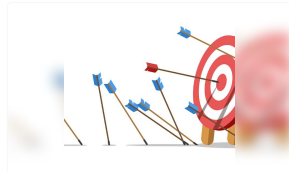
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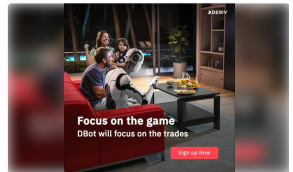
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