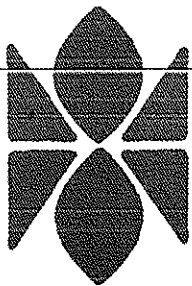


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Ban on Tobacco Use in Films and Television  
Represents Sound Public Health Policy

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## Editorial

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### Ban on Tobacco Use in Films and Television Represents Sound Public Health Policy

On 31 May 2005 (World No Tobacco Day), the Health Minister of India informed the media that the Ministry of Health would ban depiction of any form of tobacco use in films and teleserials with effect from 1 August 2005. The notification which followed also stated that Indian films made before that date as well as foreign films exhibited in India would have to incorporate scrolled health warnings in scenes where tobacco use was shown. Predictably, this announcement triggered a storm of protests from the film industry and sections of the media. After consultations with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (to which the Indian Film Censor Board is affiliated), the Health Ministry said that the ban would be prospectively implemented from 2 October 2005 (Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary). Exceptions may be made, with prior permission, in case of 'period' films or 'classics' and in case of prominent historical personalities whose image is associated with their tobacco habit. It was also agreed that, for old films and foreign films with scenes of tobacco use, their exhibitors should ensure that health warnings are shown prominently before and after the film is screened. As the debate continues to rage in the media, it is pertinent to examine this issue from the public health perspective.

#### *Tobacco has unaffordable health, economic and social costs*

Tobacco has been recognized as the single biggest cause of preventable death and disability worldwide. Every year, 5 million people die due to tobacco use. By 2030, it is expected to kill 10 million people per year, half of them in the age group of 35–69 years.<sup>1</sup> The epidemic is increasingly affecting developing countries and, by 2030, developing countries will account for 70% of all tobacco deaths. Every year, about 800 000–900 000 Indians die due to tobacco use.<sup>2</sup> The US Surgeon General's Report of 2004 states that smoking harms almost every organ of the body, causing many diseases and reducing the health of smokers in general.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the burden of diseases, the healthcare costs of tobacco are very high. The healthcare costs due to three major tobacco-related diseases in India (cancers, coronary artery disease and chronic obstructive lung disease) were estimated to be Rs 308.33 billion in the year 2002–03.<sup>2</sup> In addition, there are major environmental costs such as deforestation and pesticide use, and social costs of diverted family income and deprived education for child workers.

#### *Tobacco control requires reduction in both demand and supply*

The enormous health and economic costs of tobacco require that responsible governments adopt and implement a comprehensive strategy for tobacco control. Such a strategy must integrate measures to reduce the demand for tobacco among current and potential consumers as well as reduce the supply through measures that prohibit youth access, curb smuggling and encourage alternative crops and occupations. Demand-reduction measures are especially critical, since an unabated demand would attract supply from domestic as well as foreign sources through legal or illegal channels. A ban on advertisement of tobacco products and promotion is an important demand-reduction measure.

*Tobacco habit is initiated during youth*

As in other developing countries, the most susceptible time for initiating tobacco use in India is during adolescence and early adulthood, i.e. 15–24 years of age.<sup>4</sup> Most young adults start using tobacco before the age of 18, while some start as young as 10 years.<sup>5</sup> The Global Youth Tobacco Survey, jointly initiated by WHO and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, conducted during 2000–04 in India, is the first survey that provides state-wise data on tobacco use among the youth (13–15 years). Using a standardized methodology the survey revealed that, among school-going youth, 17.5% were current users of tobacco in any form and 8.3% were current smokers.<sup>2</sup>

*Tobacco industry especially targets the youth*

Clear evidence of this intent and strategy is available from the internal records of the tobacco industry which were revealed during the American court trials and Senate hearings of the past decade. Youth form the most attractive target for the tobacco industry, which needs to replace the millions of its 'best customers' who die each year. As in the case of the fashion and advertising industries, the tobacco industry too follows the mantra of 'catch them young'. Every day about 80 000 to 100 000 young people initiate smoking, most of them in developing countries.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, of 1000 teenagers who smoke today, 500 will eventually die of tobacco-related diseases—250 in their middle age and 250 in their old age.<sup>7</sup>

*Tobacco use by youth is influenced by many factors*

Many determinants, acting independently and in combination, influence the initiation of tobacco use among the youth. Important social–environmental factors include normative expectations (perceptions and attitudes), role models, media and advertising, social norms, opportunities v. barriers (accessibility and policy issues) and social support (tobacco use by friends). Among the most influential of these factors, as observed in western countries, is watching actors smoke on screen in films and television (role-modelling).<sup>8,9</sup> Evidence from Indian studies suggests that Indian films strongly influence teenage perceptions and behaviours.<sup>10</sup>

*Films exert a strong influence on the youth*

There is strong evidence that viewing smoking in films promotes smoking initiation among adolescents. Adolescents who viewed smoking in films the most were almost three times more likely to initiate smoking than those with the least amount of exposure. Smoking in films is responsible for 52% of teenagers who start smoking in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Films have an even more powerful effect than that of cigarette advertising. Depiction of tobacco use by actors influences young people's perceptions and attitudes about tobacco use. Their favourite actors are their role models and just as they copy their mannerisms, they imitate their tobacco use habits as well. Frequent use of tobacco on screen makes it appear a social norm. When popular actors use tobacco products, their use gains even greater social acceptability and acquires a glamorous image. Repeated exposure to tobacco use in multiple settings, especially in the popular media, conditions a young person to say 'yes' when tobacco is offered.

*Tobacco use is more common among the poor and rural segments of our society*

In India, where people are ardent film fans and even temples have been built for the worship of some film actors, not just teenagers but adults too are influenced by the on-screen behaviour of their favourite film star. Many Indian surveys have shown that tobacco use is far more frequent in persons with low levels of income and education, and in residents of rural areas.<sup>4,12</sup> Educated and affluent urban critics who say that they are not affected by films are unaware of the profound influence that films exercise on the youth in rural and small town settings, and low income groups, whether in fashion trends or tobacco uptake.

*Films promote tobacco use in many ways*

Apart from repeated exposure, films also conjure up images of smoking as a 'desirable' or 'cool' habit. A WHO study conducted in 2003 in India revealed that 76% of the top-rated films surveyed portray smoking as the 'cool' thing to do.<sup>10</sup> Product placement in films is also now a well-accepted marketing technique and tobacco is following the example of other consumer products such as colas. A total of 62 tobacco brands have been shown in Bollywood films over the past 12 years.<sup>10</sup> Placement of tobacco products in films is a direct violation of the 'advertising ban' imposed by Indian lawmakers in 2003.

*The ban is in conformity with the law of the land*

The Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products (Prohibition of Advertisement and Regulation of Trade and Commerce, Production, Supply and Distribution) Act, 2003, as approved by the Indian Parliament, calls for a complete ban on direct as well as indirect forms of advertising and promotion of tobacco products.<sup>13</sup> The proposed ban on the depiction of tobacco use in films and television relies on the compelling evidence that such use promotes tobacco uptake by the youth.

*The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) requires a comprehensive ban on advertising and promotion*

The decision of the Indian Parliament is also in harmony with the FCTC, which India has ratified and is obligated to implement. The ban on tobacco use in films meets the objectives of Article 13 of the FCTC.

*International evidence suggests that only a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertising is effective*

Evidence presented by the World Bank clearly demonstrates that countries that have implemented comprehensive bans on all forms of advertising and promotion have reduced tobacco use much more quickly and to lower levels than other countries.<sup>6</sup> The Health Ministry's move is consistent with the need to make the ban on advertising and promotion as complete as possible.

*The protests against the ban are not well founded*

The argument put forth by Bollywood that this ban curbs their freedom of expression and creativity is based on incorrect assumptions. This ban does not affect the creativity of the film industry as no story line is linked critically to the tobacco-consuming trait of a character. In fact, this ban will free film directors and producers from relentless commercial pressures of brand endorsement and rid the screen of stale stereotypes associated with tobacco smoking. No talented actor or director needs to use a cigarette or a *beedi* as a crutch to depict a debonair hero, a menacing villain or an emancipated woman. 'Films only reflect the prevailing social reality' is also a weak alibi, when films are a powerful medium that can and do shape values and have been used in the past to fight social evils such as dowry, child marriage and bonded labour.

*The ban also protects the rights of non-smoking film and television personnel*

Shooting of a smoking scene in a film or television studio exposes non-smoking personnel to the hazards of passive smoking. A ban on smoking in indoor workplaces is recommended by the FCTC. Smoking in indoor workplaces should be considered on par with smoking in public places, which is an offence under the Indian law. The film industry will lose nothing by way of commerce but gain a great deal by way of health, by agreeing to free films from tobacco fumes.

*Other countries too are acting against tobacco in films*

There is a global move towards banning depiction of tobacco use in films to protect vulnerable youth groups. Thailand has a law that prohibits depiction of smoking in films which are shown on television. In the USA, the Smoke-Free Movies Action

Network is calling on Hollywood studios and their parent companies to self-regulate and keep smoking out of youth-rated movies. Hollywood is also banned from accepting paid brand product placement under the 1998 Master Settlement Agreement between tobacco companies and the US government.

The Indian film industry is the largest producer of films in the world, with over 900 films per year. Its viewership extends not only to India but to many other countries across all inhabited continents. The virtual elimination of tobacco from Indian films will send a powerful message to society against the greatest killer of the modern era, which is expected to claim one billion lives in the twenty-first century.

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