Ban on public spitting and SLT to control Covid19 may not be enough

India is one of the largest producers and consumers of tobacco in the world. It is estimated that the country has more than 200 million smokeless tobacco (SLT) users and 267 million plus users in total[1]. In 2019, Assocham estimated tobacco contributed Rs 11.79 lakh crore to the Indian GDP. Around 4.5 crore people are directly or indirectly employed by tobacco and allied industries. This makes tobacco an important contributor to Indian economy. However, on the flip side, tobacco kills more than one million people per year in India, costing over Rs 1 lakh crore to the economy[2].

In the past few months, Covid-19 has brought the world to its knees. India is among the top 10 countries affected by the pandemic. Despite significant efforts by the government and the society, the pandemic is spreading rapidly and the chances of a miraculous vaccine in near future are bleak. Currently, the only possible way to tackle the virus is limiting and controlling its spread.

Recent studies have shown that the novel coronavirus is present and can survive in human saliva[3]. This is used in the testing for Covid-19, but it also makes saliva a means for transmission through coughing or spitting, which has strong potential to infect those coming in contact.

In the absence of stringent laws, public spitting is commonplace in India. Saliva is a carrier of various germs which can cause severe health risks, including the Covid-19 infection. The human saliva is more than 99 percent water, therefore in case of spitting by non-tobacco users, it evaporates quickly, leaving almost no trace behind. But when SLT users spit, it has a significant amount of chewed tobacco and other material in it, which makes their saliva more viscous and facilitates germ spread. It also leaves stains behind and makes public places dirty. SLT users also spit more often.

Most adults are conscious not to touch any surface spat on, but children and animals are always at risk of infection. Although no cases of human to animal transfer of Covid-19 have come to light, the virus has the ability to mutate. Another danger is of the virus entering water bodies in this manner.

With the awareness campaigns by the government and NGOs not dissuading public spitting, bans backed by heavy penalties have emerged as the sole solution. India has legislations against the use of SLT in public places and spitting[4], however in the absence of proper implementation, they have been unable to curb the problem.

Union health minister Harsh Vardhan has been pushing states to ban the sale and use of SLT products to curb public spitting[5]. A PIL was filed in Delhi high court on May 5 seeking a blanket ban on the sale and use of SLT products[6]. On May 15, the Union government made public spitting a punishable offense under the Disaster Management Act 2005[7]. The act provides for fines, and in some cases, imprisonment for spitting in public. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) has already proposed a fine of Rs 1,000 on anyone caught spitting in public.

However, prohibition of spitting and sale of products during lockdown alone cannot solve this problem as the latter often leads to the emergence of other evils such as black marketing. It might also encourage risk-taking behaviour among tobacco users who break lockdown restrictions in search of their product, increasing the risk of virus spread.

The government should focus on measures which encourage long-term abstinence from tobacco use. Providing support to those who are looking to quit or giving them means to reduce harm can yield positive results. Nicotine gums can be an effective cessation tool but they are unaffordable to most SLT users. A government subsidy to bring them within the reach of SLT users will go a long way. Further, for those who are unable to quit or for some reasons do not wish to quit using nicotine, access to reduced-risk alternatives such as snus or e-cigarettes can help bring down tobacco-related mortality and morbidity.

Tobacco use is no less than an epidemic in India. The government should work out a comprehensive strategy to spread awareness about the perils of public spitting and keep up the regulatory pressure to curb SLT use, and also encourage a switch to less harmful tobacco alternatives, ensure their availability and make them financially viable.

References

1. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/326043/9789241516204-eng.pdf?ua=1
2. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/272672/wntd_2018_india_fs.pdf?sequence=1
3. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/saliva-of-covid-19-patients-contain-virus-study-finds/article30811742.ece
4. https://untobaccocontrol.org/kh/smokeless-tobacco/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/08/factsheet_8.pdf
5. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/cons-products/tobacco/covid-19-prohibit-use-spitting-of-smokeless-tobacco-in-public-places-health-ministry-tells-states/articleshow/75091929.cms?from=mdr
6. https://www.businessinsider.in/india/news/pil-in-hc-seeks-ban-on-chewing-tobacco-to-check-public-spitting-covid-19-risk/articleshow/75556193.cms
7. https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/spitting-in-public-now-an-offence-under-disaster-management-act-mha/articleshow/75161291.cms