

Wednesday , April 12 , 2017 |

Higher tobacco taxes can 'avert 35m early deaths'

Our Special Correspondent

New Delhi, April 11: Higher excise taxes on cigarettes and *beedis* that reduce smoking by one-third could avert an estimated 35 million to 45 million premature deaths across South Asia in the coming decades, a paper released today has suggested.

The paper, prepared by a team of public health specialists, calls on India and other South Asian countries to implement higher levels of taxes, citing earlier research which showed that raising taxes on tobacco is the single most effective intervention to lower smoking rates.

The analysis, published today in the *British Medical Journal*, examined the impact of higher taxes on current and future smokers under and above the age of 35 years, taking into account smoking prevalence and future population growth.

It suggests that South Asian countries could avoid 25 million premature smoking-linked deaths if one-third of the 140 million smokers below 35 years of age quit tobacco and avoid an additional 10 to 20 million premature deaths if the 100 million people above 35 stop.

"At least half of the 140 million young and future smokers would die because of smoking, unless large numbers of them stop," said Prabhat Jha, professor of public health at the University of Toronto Canada, who led the new analysis. "At least half of these 70 million deaths would occur before age 70."

The estimated number of smokers in India has increased from 88 million in 1998 to about 120 million in 2015, although overall smoking prevalence has marginally reduced. Studies estimate that about one million (10 lakh) people die prematurely from smoking-related causes in India annually.

"A single large tax on all cigarettes and *beedis* would help reduce smoking," said Prakash Gupta, director of the Healis Sekhsaria Institute of Public Health, Navi Mumbai, and member of the study team. "Beedis are at present taxed at an insignificant rate. This has to change."

The researchers said the tax deterrent is all the more necessary in South Asia because of the region's low voluntary smoking cessation rates.

"Much of the cessation in South Asia ... is because disease has developed and not to avoid the development of disease," the researchers wrote.

The proportion of male smokers who have quit between the ages 45 and 59 - an age when adults are most likely to want to consider quitting - in India and Nepal is less than 5 per cent.

The call for higher taxes on tobacco products comes at a time the health ministry has urged the finance ministry to do away with tax exemptions traditionally given to the *beedi* industry and impose a uniform high tax rate on all tobacco products.

Jha and his colleagues have said the prices of cigarettes, *beedis*, and chewing tobacco are lower in South Asia than in high-income countries in the West because the excise taxes are low.

The annual increases in tobacco taxes are below the rates of inflation and income growth, keeping cigarettes affordable, they said.

The finance ministry, under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) initiatives, has classified aerated drinks, all tobacco products, luxury cars, and pan masala as "demerit goods" and placed the highest 28 per cent tax on them with provisions of a cess.

The health ministry had in an office memorandum sent to the finance ministry last December had recommended that tax exemptions on sections of the *beedi* sector should be "done away with". It had also suggested that all *beedi* manufacturing units be duly licensed.