

School students take on the tobacco menace with rakhis

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Raksha Bandhan was celebrated throughout the city on Tuesday, and many sisters tied the symbolical thread of protection on their brothers' wrist. But for Std IX students from a Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) school, it was a different kind of Raksha Bandhan all together. Schoolgirls from the GK Marg Municipal School at Lower Parel walked around their school premises tying rakhis to paanwallas, and convincing them to not sell tobacco products to minors.

Salaam Bombay foundation, along with nearly 100 BMC schools, has initiated this pilot project. The idea originated from the students, who called themselves the Su-

per Army'. Narayan Lad, senior project coordinator, Salaam Bombay foundation, says, "Each school has a Super Army. Their main objective is to make fellow students aware of the harmful effects of tobacco, and also pass on the message to paan vendors."

The rakhis had messages written in Hindi and Marathi. Along with the rakhis, hand-made cards were given to the paanwallas. A traditional ceremony was conducted by the girls, and the boys carried the cards and posters.

Student Akshaya Kelkar decorated the thali for her new-found brothers. "We decided to start with the paanwallas because they operate close to the schools and we have noticed many students buying tobacco products from

them," she said.

What if they notice their brothers selling tobacco products to children even after the drive? "Then we'll remind them of the promise they made," said Kelkar.

Held on August 23 and 24, the drive was pretty successful, but convincing the paanwallas was not an easy task. Many ignored the students' pleas. Sushil Kumar Joshi, whose paan shop is right next to the school, refused to get a rakhi tied by the children. "My family doesn't celebrate rakhi," said.

But, there were others who were impressed by the initiative. Suren Jaiswal of Anand paan shop was happy to get a personalised rakhi. "I am against all vendors who sell tobacco to children," he said.