

City is at the fag end of tolerance

Sumitra Deb Roy & Deepa Suryanarayan

The verdict is out: Mumbai wants to be smoke-free. The new stricter law may just provide the necessary thrust. Sumitra Deb Roy and Deepa Suryanarayan report

The fight against passive smoking just got a shot in the arm. A recent survey revealed that nine out of 10 people in all four metros were in favour of having restaurants, pubs and their workplaces smoke-free.

The survey, instituted by the Healis Sekhsaria Institute for Public Health, and carried out by Synovate's Global Omnibus showed that 99% of the surveyed Mumbaikars were in support of legislation against smoking in public and workplaces.

In Chennai, Mumbai and Delhi about 96% of those questioned were in favour of a smoke-free environment.

The survey conducted with a sample size of 1,030 people in the age-group of 15-64 years also included the opinions of 11 per cent smokers. "A considerable section of the population was aware of the hazards of passive smoking and felt strongly about its rights," said Dr PC Gupta, director, Healis Sekhsaria Institute. The survey stated that 84% of those interviewed believed that exposure to second-hand smoke was a serious health hazard.

"Scientifically, there is no safe level of exposure to second-hand smoke," said Dr SM Shanbhag, president, Indian Association of Occupational Health. "So it's high time non-smokers reclaimed their right to smoke-free air."

The study comes in the wake of the union health ministry's announcement to ban smoking in public and workplaces from October 2 onwards. Second-hand smoke is known to cause lung cancer, heart disease, low-birth weight and chronic lung-ailments like bronchitis and asthma, particularly in children.

Unfortunately, in India most of the anti-smoking laws have fallen through for want of implementation or better policing. However, this time, the upcoming law has fixed all the loopholes. "The earlier laws allowed special smoking zones but the present legislation does not even allow this," pointed out Gupta. The government has already written to the Hoteliers and Restaurants Association intimating them of the ban.

The cooperation of corporates in adhering to the law could make all the difference, said anti-tobacco activists. Godrej Industries, for instance, have been following a tobacco-free policy for the last 14 years, with great success. "The medical cost of the company came down by 20 per cent," revealed Dr DT Jadhav, corporate medical advisor, Godrej Industries.

"Employees are not allowed to smoke even inside the company vehicle," said Narendra Ambwani, managing director, Johnson & Johnson, who declared their premises smoke-free since 2002.

"This," he said, "is a big deterrent for smokers, as they have to go walk a long way to go to the street just to smoke."