

India joins the world in banning smoking in public

India Thursday joined a growing number of nations in imposing a total ban on smoking in public but there were doubts about how effectively the diktat could be imposed.

Smoking was already banned in government offices, hospitals, airports and aircraft, railway stations and trains. And this has now been extended to offices, theatres, restaurants, malls, shopping complexes, parks and recreational areas - in short, any place where groups of people gather.

Henceforth, anyone found smoking on the streets will be liable to a fine of Rs.200 while those caught smoking on office premises will be fined Rs.5,000, with the onus on the employer to levy the penalty.

Thus, effective Thursday, one can smoke in peace only at home or in a specially designated area in a restaurant or pub.

According to Health Minister Anbumani Ramadoss, the people have 'overwhelmingly responded' to the ban.

'The people have overwhelmingly responded to the ban. They have come forward in their hundreds to support the ban,' he told reporters.

Ramadoss is a firm proponent of the ban, saying that while the tobacco industry generated Rs.350 billion, the government and private individuals spent a whopping Rs.360 billion in treating tobacco-related diseases.

It is estimated that some 900,000 people Indians die annually of tobacco-related diseases.

In fact, smoking in public places is already banned throughout Kerala while Chandigarh has just celebrated the first anniversary of being declared a 'smokeless' city and the health ministry directive will only serve to reinforce the measure.

However, more than one official across India was unsure about the manner in which the ban would be imposed - because the government notification had not been received as Thursday was a public holiday on account of Mahatma Gandhi birth anniversary.

'The notification has not yet come to me. Thursday is a government holiday. May be, I will get it Friday,' Inspector General of Police (Law and Order) Raj Kanojia told IANS in West Bengal capital Kolkata.

And, in the national capital too, the enforcers of the ban were nowhere to be seen - because it was a holiday.

Not surprisingly then, a quick survey by IANS across a number of Indian cities revealed that the ban was being observed more in its breach in public places like bus stops and market places - but quite effectively in theatres, hotels, restaurants, pubs and malls.

India's IT capital of [Bangalore](#) typified much of the reaction across India as owners of hundreds of

small pubs opened for business Thursday fearing moderate revenue losses as the ban came into effect.

'I fear that many of my regular customers may not drop in for a sip and may not like to be huddled in a corner to smoke,' said A. Ashwin, who runs a bar on Kempegowda Road in Bangalore's central business district.

Police said it will take some days to ensure the ban is effective in pubs and restaurants as they do not have manpower to go round the hundreds dotting Bangalore city alone.

In India's commercial capital of Mumbai, celebrities like Shah Rukh Khan and Saif Ali Khan might have joined many others in welcoming the ban on smoking, common citizens were apparently taking it in their stride.

Sale of cigarettes continued as usual at all corner shops, roadside vends and even at shopping malls. However, some smokers exhibited discretion by moving away from the main roads to by-lanes and continued to puff away, even as passers-by ignored them.

The ban was welcomed in Chandigarh, which July 15 celebrated its first anniversary as a 'smokeless city'. However, in towns like Ludhiana and Amritsar in Punjab and at some places in Haryana, the authorities did not appear to be geared up to enforce the ban.

A similar situation prevailed in cities like Uttar Pradesh capital Lucknow, Chhattisgarh capital Raipur, Madhya Pradesh Bhopal, Agartala capital Tripura and Orissa capital Bhubaneswar.

In Himachal Pradesh, various corporates and private establishments have issued advisories to their employees to refrain from smoking or face the music.

Kerala too welcomed the ban, though Home Minister Kodayeri Balakrishnan was sceptical about its effectiveness.

According to Balakrishnan: 'a total curb on smoking is possible only by creating awareness among people'.

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