

Controlling India's junk food addiction

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Developing countries like India have imported unhealthy food habits from the developed world. They must take cue from Chile that has taken an unprecedented step to fight obesity with a new food labeling law

Chile has taken an unprecedented step by requiring labels to be placed on food that has high sugar, calories, sodium or saturated fat. This regulation also bans the sale of any of these products in schools as well as advertisements related to them that target children under the age of 14. This is clearly one of the most forward looking steps taken by any country to ensure curbs on junk food and the excessive intake of sugar, salt and fats, which are proving increasingly harmful for the health of children and adults all over the world.

India is no exception to the worldwide trend which has led to a major expansion of harmful food products and what is generally labelled as junk food. It is a matter of deep concern that we in developing countries have blindly aped and acquired food habits imported from the developed world which have proven increasingly harmful to the health of a growing number of people who have developed an addiction for these harmful diets. According to news reports hunger has been reduced in latin America and the Caribbean, but obesity has doubled in the region in the past decade. Countries like Chile and Mexico are nearing the overweight and obesity levels of the United States according to the World Health Organisation. Chile's Health Ministry states that five out of every 10 children are overweight and one of every eleven deaths is linked to obesity.

The new regulation, of course, will be questioned and challenged by many, and vested interests that find it in their short-term interest to stall any action against unhealthy food and growing obesity, will do everything to prevent the effective implementation of Chile's new regulations. For instance, one particular Italian company has already threatened to take legal action against the Chilean Government to protect one of its chocolate products, which would not meet the stringent regulations which have been specified now.

In our country, with rapid urbanisation and through the power of advertising the move towards junk food is becoming a serious menace. In fact, this is a problem confined not only to urban locations, but even in rural areas packaged junk food is making major inroads. It is particularly disturbing to travel to our hill stations and find that beautiful mountain sites are not only denuded of green cover but littered with piles of packaging material from paan masala to potato chips to biscuit wrappers all over the place. There is today valid concern on the increase in use of drugs in certain parts of the country and the dangers from widespread addiction, particularly among youth. As it happens, and for very clear demographic and economic reasons the junk food industry also targets youth as their favoured customers. This is not only because of the size of the market that young people in this country represent, but also because if the suppliers of all these products catch them young then they would remain hooked on as addicted customers throughout their lives.

James Clear, an analyst and commentator on issues of public interest, rightly states that the goal of the producers of junk food is to create a craving for those products among consumers. Craving is a function of taste, smell and how a particular food product feels in the mouth, referred to as “orosensation”. According to him companies spend millions of dollars to make sure that potato chips produced by them have the right type of crunch, so that the consumer enjoys that and gets addicted to that characteristic as much as the taste and smell. As far as taste is concerned, the focus of suppliers is on the actual “macronutrient makeup of the food — the blend of proteins, fats, and carbohydrates that it contains”. In the promotion of junk food, suppliers work towards creating a perfect combination of salt, sugar, and fat with an intent to excite the brain, which would induce the consumer to keep coming back for more.

Advertising, both by overt and covert means has a huge role in creating consumption habits and addiction to some products. In the middle of the 20th century every Hollywood movie projected the hero as a compulsive smoker, with a cigarette drooling from his mouth even when while engaged in romantic dialogue. All of that had a powerful effect in expanding addiction to cigarette smoking. No doubt, in some cases the actors themselves received significant compensation for this not so subtle promotional effort. Now, this has shifted to James Bond wearing designer watches and high end apparel.

Soft drinks, and addiction to them is also harmful to human health, but producers of these products spend huge sums of money and adopt innovative ways to promote their products, such as through sponsorships of prominent cricket tournaments and events. In the US the consumption of soft drinks has reached unprecedented levels. Since 1978 soda consumption has tripled for boys and doubled for girls. It is reported that young males between the ages of 12 to 29 are the biggest consumers with 160 gallons per year on average. At these levels the calories from soft drinks alone areas much as 10 per cent of the total daily calorie intake for growing youngsters.

Addiction at this level basically leads to a compulsive desire to open a can of soft drinks whenever a person feels a decline in energy. Interestingly, the danger from high levels of soft drinks consumption was highlighted by the American Medical Association Council on Food and Nutrition as far back as in 1942, when it stated that it would be in the interest of the public for all practical means to be taken to limit consumption of sugar in any form in which it fails to be combined with significant proportions of other foods of high nutrition quality. These drinks have been referred to as liquid Candy, because they create an addiction for high intakes of sugar. There is evidence that excessive consumption of these soft drinks leads to osteoporosis and bone fractures.

With a blind fascination for the way of life in the developed countries, particularly that followed in North America, the younger generation in India also is moving on the same path motivated, unfortunately, by massive advertising. The global advertising industry this year is expected to spend \$579 billion, and with the spread of the Internet, growth in that segment is likely to be far more rapid than conventional advertising. In a free and democratic society the dissemination of information is fundamental to the exercise of free choices, but where advertising a product leads to harmful effects for the public, such as through negative health implications, society has to introduce appropriate regulatory measures and practices.

This, of course, has to be driven by public concerns and action by civil society. As yet, such a movement is not in evidence in India. Within that context it is particularly important that we study what Chile has achieved through its recent action, the evolution of which would, of course, take some time. However, it is obvious that Chile has carried out due diligence before introducing its recent regulatory measures, because the law under

which this step has been taken was approved in 2012. It is time that we in India consider similar steps in the interest of protecting the health of the public and ensuring that the expenditure and decline in health of consumers does not continue to fatten the wallets of those who are in the production of junk foods, the range and scale of which is perhaps reaching epidemic proportions.

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