

बोलो जुबां कैसरी



Daane daane mein cancer ka dum

Pan Masala—it's more than just a mouth freshener!

Containing world's fourth most addictive substance—areca nut—it is the leading cause of oral submucous fibrosis that often leads to oral cancer.

FROM ZUBA KESARI TO ZUBA CANCER: STRENGTHENING ARECA NUT REGULATION IN INDIA

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Areca nut (supari) holds deep cultural and social significance in India, but it also poses an escalating public health crisis. Now classified as a Group 1 carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the habitual use of areca nut—especially in processed, flavored forms like pan masala and gutkha—has been directly linked to oral submucous fibrosis (OSMF), oral cancers, and other systemic diseases.

India, despite commendable progress in tobacco regulation, lacks a coherent legal framework for areca nut control. This gap undermines efforts to reduce the burden of oral cancer, especially among youth and rural populations, where areca nut use is rampant and awareness is low.

This policy brief compares existing Indian laws with international models and scientific evidence to propose comprehensive legal, regulatory, and communication reforms.

1. The Hidden Epidemic: Scientific & Social Realities

- **Carcinogenic Evidence:** Areca nut contains arecoline, a mutagenic alkaloid that promotes fibrosis, dysplasia, and cancer. Chronic use is strongly associated with OSMF, which carries a 7–13% risk of transformation into oral cancer.
- **Low Awareness & Youth Initiation:** Studies in urban India show that adolescents consider areca nuts “safe”, compared to alcohol or cigarettes. Flavored variants, colorful packaging, and celebrity endorsements increase their susceptibility.
- **Disease Burden:** India has the highest global burden of oral cancer, and areca nut use is endemic in high-risk states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, and Maharashtra.



Current Legal Landscape: Fragmented & Insufficient Evidence

Law / Guidelines	Scope	Limitations
FSSAI, 2006	Prohibits tobacco in food	Does not classify areca nuts as
COTPA, 2003	Regulates tobacco	Does not include pan masala or
State Notifications	Temporary bans on	Inconsistent, often overturned
ASCI Guidelines	Discourage surrogate ads	Non-enforceable and lacks legal
Plastic Waste Rules	Control packaging	Does not regulate content or

2. Innate Gaps & Challenges

Surrogate & Celebrity Advertising

Luxury-brand campaigns use mouth fresheners as proxies for tobacco-related pan masala. Ads often feature Bollywood icons, building false trust and glamorization.

No Central Product Registry

Unlike tobacco, areca nut products lack barcode tracking, standard formulation regulations, or manufacturer registration.

Loose and Unregulated Sales

Small, unbranded sachets are sold in unlabeled plastic wraps, often near schools and public transit hubs.

No Pictorial Health Warnings

Current packaging does not display graphic or textual health warnings, even though the product is carcinogenic.

3. Recommendations for Comprehensive Reform

Legal & Institutional Reforms

1. Amend FSSAI (2006)
2. → Classify processed/flavored areca nut as hazardous, especially when marketed for chewing.
3. Introduce Areca Nut Regulation Rules
4. → Under COTPA or as standalone legislation, covering:
 - Age and point-of-sale restrictions
 - Graphic health warnings
 - Vendor licensing and packaging norms
5. Ban Surrogate Advertising
6. Amend Advertising Law to:
 - Criminalize deceptive advertising
 - Prohibit celebrity endorsements of supari and pan masala

Technology & Enforcement Innovations

- Implement QR-coded packaging linked to national product registries
- Enable mobile PHW verification for inspectors and consumers
- Geo-tag SLT/supari vendors via a centralized monitoring portal

Health System & Community Interventions

- Integrate oral lesion screening for OSMF/oral cancer into primary health programs (Ayushman Bharat, NPCDCS)
- Train ASHA and ANM workers in areca nut harm education
- Launch visual storytelling campaigns for low-literacy audiences



Mass Awareness Campaigns

- Use TV, radio, OTT, YouTube, and school-based programs to educate young consumers
- Promote real-life oral cancer survivor stories to create emotional resonance
- Work with regional influencers, especially in high-consumption states

Global Best Practices

Country	Policy Action	Results
<i>Taiwan</i>	Public betel nut cessation clinics	22% decline in habitual chewing
<i>Guam</i>	A legal ban on public chewing	Normalization reduced,
<i>UK/US</i>	Diaspora-focused campaigns	Awareness among South Asians

These corporations dominate the pan masala industry and have a history of surrogate marketing, regulatory circumvention, and brand mimicry.

Areca nut has transformed from a cultural artifact to a carcinogenic commodity, stealthily causing India's oral cancer crisis. The current regulatory vacuum, coupled with aggressive advertising and public ignorance, enables a silent epidemic to flourish. India now stands at a crossroads. A multi-sectoral, evidence-based, enforceable regulatory framework is essential, not to destroy tradition, but to safeguard generations from preventable harm.

Global Best Practices

Brands	Group	Characteristics
<i>RMD, Baba Elaichi</i>	Manikchand	Among the top 3 gutkha brands;
<i>Rajnigandha, Pass Pass</i>	DS Group	Premium branding; luxury
<i>Pan Bahar</i>	Pan Bahar Ltd.	Aggressive celebrity-backed
<i>Kamla Pasand</i>	Dharmani Group	Deep rural penetration;

“Zuba Kesari is now becoming Zuba Canceri.”