

SHORT ARTICLE

Policy on Paper, Gaps in Practice: A Qualitative Assessment of COTPA Compliance in Educational Institutions of Bhubaneswar, India

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ABSTRACT

Background: Tobacco use remains a pervasive public health concern in India, with initiation often beginning at a young age. The Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA) 2003 mandates that educational institutions be tobacco-free, yet compliance remains inconsistent. **Objectives:** To qualitatively assess compliance with COTPA regulations in schools of Bhubaneswar. **Methods:** A qualitative cross-sectional exploratory study was conducted using observations and semi-structured interviews with teachers and principals. Sampling was stratified across schools. Data collection was based on CBSE guidelines and analysed thematically. **Results:** Findings revealed partial compliance with COTPA. Signboards were absent in 50% of government schools, tobacco shops were found within 100 yards of several government institutions, and evidence of tobacco use (wrappers, butts) was observed in all schools. Teacher awareness of COTPA varied, with many perceiving chewing tobacco as culturally acceptable, especially in Government schools. Themes included poor enforcement, cultural acceptance, and peer influence. **Conclusion:** Compliance with COTPA in Bhubaneswar schools remains inadequate, highlighting the need for stronger enforcement and sensitization of teachers and staff.

KEYWORDS

COTPA, Tobacco, School health, Children, Adolescent health

INTRODUCTION

Tobacco use in Odisha is rampant and deeply socially and culturally ingrained, and the habit is perpetuated mostly in schools (1). Hence this study was planned for a rapid exploratory assessment of compliance to COTPA in schools of the institute's catchment area.

Objectives:

- To explore compliance with COTPA regulations in educational institutions of Bhubaneswar.
- To assess awareness and practices among teachers and staff regarding tobacco use.
- To identify environmental facilitators and barriers around schools influencing tobacco access.

MATERIAL & METHODS

Study Setting and Participants: The study was conducted in South Bhubaneswar, where the institute is located, and included students from Class V onwards (8–16 years), along with faculty and staff members.

Study Team and Training: A dedicated team of postgraduate residents in Community Medicine, under faculty supervision, was trained in COTPA provisions, ethical practices, and data collection procedures prior to the study.

Inclusion Criteria: Secondary and higher secondary schools located within the South administrative zone of Bhubaneswar.

- Students from Class V onwards (8–16 years).
- Faculty and staff members willing to participate.
- Vendors located within 100 yards of selected schools.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Schools located outside the South administrative zone of Bhubaneswar.
- Students enrolled below Class V or outside the 8–16 years age range.
- Faculty, staff, students, or vendors who declined to provide informed consent.
- Students with known or reported mental health disorders that could affect participation.
- Schools undergoing long-term medical leave, major renovation, administrative restructuring, or with restricted entry due to examinations or special events.
- Vendors without a permanent stall/shop (e.g., mobile hawkers), as their presence may not consistently reflect the school environment.

Data Collection: Each school was visited twice—once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Observations

were recorded using a structured checklist adapted from CBSE guidelines (www.cbse.nic.in/circulars/cir18-2009.doc). Short interviews (10–15 minutes) were also conducted with school staff and nearby vendors.

Figure 1A: Flow diagram of sampling strategy and PRISMA-style flow diagram of school selection

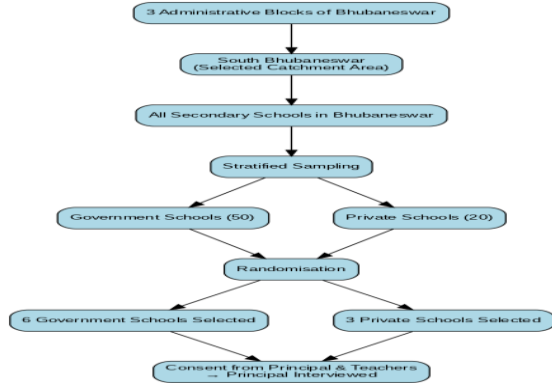
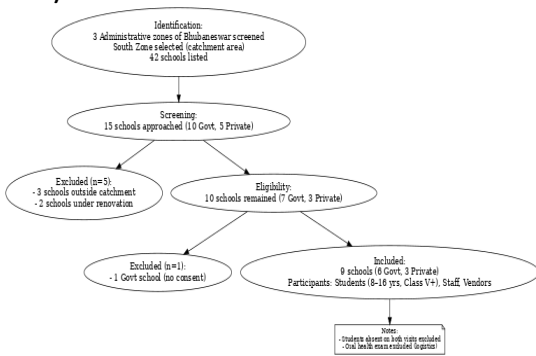


Figure 1B: School Selection and Participant Inclusion Flowchart for Oral Health Study in Bhubaneswar (South Zone)



The checklist was developed out of COTPA Guidelines Considered in School Curriculum

The following provisions of the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA), 2003 were considered in the context of school compliance:

- Section 4: Prohibition of smoking in public places, including educational institutions

Table 1: School Compliance Indicators with COTPA Regulations

Parameter	Government Schools (n=6)	Private Schools (n=3)	Fisher exact	p-value
Display of Tobacco-Free Signage	3 (50.0%)	2 (66.7%)	0.00	1.000
Tobacco/Betel Shops within 100 yards	6 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	5.06	0.024
Evidence of Tobacco Use on Premises	5 (83.3%)	0 (0.0%)	4.00	0.046
Training of Teachers on COTPA	2 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	0.06	0.813
Observation of World Tobacco Day	3 (50.0%)	2 (66.7%)	0.00	1.000

*p value < 0.05 is considered to be statistically significant

* With prior permission from the principal, four dustbins (washroom, staff room, classroom, and canteen) were inspected after the lunch hour and again at closing time for the presence of food wrappers and packets."

Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Teacher Interviews

Theme	Sub-themes	Illustrative Quotes
Awareness of COTPA	Partial knowledge; focus on smoking only	"We know smoking is banned, but not sure about chewing tobacco." "It is difficult to know about chewing and invariably boys do it uninhibitedly"
Cultural Acceptance	Chewing tobacco seen as normal practice	"Many adults here chew gutkha; it is difficult to stop students copying." "During examinations smoking helps keep awake and alert"
Enforcement Issues	Weak monitoring; lack of penalties	"Shops near the school continue selling despite rules." Packaging is very attractive and at very low prices

- Section 6(a): Prohibition of sale of tobacco products to persons below 18 years of age.
- Section 6(b): Prohibition of sale of tobacco products within 100 yards of any educational institution.
- Section 7: Mandatory display of pictorial health warnings on tobacco product packages.
- Section 21: Penalties and enforcement responsibilities.

The CBSE Circular No. 18 (2009) further mandated display of 'Tobacco-Free School' signage, periodic monitoring, and integration of anti-tobacco messages within the school curriculum.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis of interview transcripts and field notes was undertaken. Themes were developed to capture key dimensions of compliance and perceptions of tobacco use.

Ethical Considerations: Necessary approvals were obtained from school principals and authorities, with assurances of confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, and any refusals were respectfully documented without replacement.

RESULTS

This study was conducted in 9 schools of Bhubaneswar, both private and government. Table 1 Government schools showed higher tobacco-related exposure compared to private schools, with significant differences in the presence of tobacco/betel shops within 100 yards (Fisher exact = 5.06, p = 0.024) and evidence of tobacco use on premises (Fisher exact = 4.00, p = 0.046).

Table 2 summarizes the Themes and subthemes of Teacher Interviews: Awareness of COTPA regulations was variable, with partial knowledge focusing mainly on smoking rather than chewing tobacco. Cultural acceptance of chewing tobacco emerged as a strong theme. Teachers expressed difficulties in monitoring students outside school premises. Sometimes, male teachers are users themselves and there is no very strict restriction against use of Tobacco products by teachers in classes.

		Educational talks on harmful effects of tobacco are rare, in curricula also it is sparingly discussed.
Peer Influence	Older students influencing younger peers	"Some students bring tobacco products and share them secretly." Macho image and think it is stylish, influenced by movies

Thematic analysis highlighted three broad domains: administrative compliance (signboards, rules), environmental compliance (shops near schools, evidence of use), and awareness/attitudes (teachers' knowledge, perceptions, peer influence), which can outline the generic interventions to improve COPTA compliance in schools.

DISCUSSION

Tobacco use continues to be a leading cause of morbidity and mortality globally and in India. The Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA), enacted in 2003, seeks to regulate tobacco consumption, with specific provisions to ensure tobacco-free educational institutions. Section 6 of COTPA prohibits the sale of tobacco products to minors and within 100 yards of educational institutions (2). In addition, as per COTPA rules, it is mandatory for all schools and colleges to display prominent signages at entrances and inside premises stating that the sale and use of tobacco products is strictly prohibited in and around educational institutions (3).

Despite these legal provisions, compliance in school settings remains suboptimal. Studies conducted across different Indian states have consistently reported poor adherence to tobacco-free guidelines (4). For instance, surveys in Delhi and Rajasthan found that many schools did not have the mandated signages, and tobacco vendors continued to operate within close proximity of school gates (3,5). Another study in Mumbai slum communities observed that although awareness of COTPA existed among some stakeholders, enforcement was weak due to limited local authority involvement and sociocultural acceptance of smokeless tobacco products. The study demonstrates partial compliance with COTPA (6) regulations in Bhubaneswar schools. Our findings are consistent with studies from Delhi (7) and Maharashtra that also reported gaps in enforcement around educational institutions. Unique to Odisha is the cultural acceptance of chewing tobacco, which complicates enforcement. WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) emphasizes the importance of protecting youth from tobacco initiation, and local enforcement plays a critical role in this process.

Teacher sensitization, regular monitoring, and stronger collaboration with law enforcement are needed to improve compliance. Integration of tobacco control messages into school health programs could also strengthen preventive efforts. The disconnect between legal mandates and on-ground implementation reflects systemic challenges in enforcement, awareness, and cultural attitudes toward tobacco use in school environments (8).

There are limitations that the whole Bhubaneswar could not be included due to funds constraints. Senior schools and universities also could not be taken up and to get consent for such studies is also cumbersome unless it is supported by State Health officials.

CONCLUSION

Compliance with COTPA regulations in Bhubaneswar schools remains highly inadequate. Signage, enforcement, and awareness among teachers require strengthening (6). Collaborative approaches involving schools, local authorities, and health systems are essential to establish truly tobacco-free educational environments.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

All authors have contributed equally.

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Nil

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The authors haven't used any generative AI/AI assisted technologies in the writing process.

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