Hooghly youth who lost tongue to cancer writes to Mamata

Victim cries for gutka ban

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New Delhi, June 1: A 26-year-old man from Hooghly who lost his tongue to cancer in a Mumbai hospital last week has lent his voice to a public health campaign urging the Bengal government to ban the sale of gutka laced with tobacco.

Mantu Mahato, who was diagnosed with advanced tongue cancer earlier this year, five years after he started chewing gutka, has written a letter to chief minister Mamata Banerjee urging her to ban its sale across the state.

His plea is a part of a nationwide campaign conducted by the Mumbai-based Voice of Tobacco Victims, a body of patients and doctors, that has been asking states to ban gutka, and is being spearheaded in the state by the Bengal Oncology Foundation.

"After Madhya Pradesh and Kerala, we hope Bengal will become the next state to ban gutka," said Pankaj Chaturvedi, a cancer surgeon at the Tata Memorial Hospital in Mumbai, where Mahato's tongue was surgically removed last week.

"We think a ban on gutka is something politically easy to do in Bengal," Chaturvedi told The Telegraph. "There is no manufacture of any gutka in Bengal, it is produced in other states, but the gutka-chewing habit appears to be growing there."

All states are expected to ban the sale of gutka under Food Safety Standards Authority rules notified by the Centre in August 2011 that prohibit the sale of tobacco or nicotine in food substances. Madhya Pradesh and Kerala have already issued orders to ban gutka.

The Bengal Oncology Foundation has sent documents to the government calling for a similar ban, the foundation's secretary Gautam Mukhopadhyay told The Telegraph.

"We're hoping to have a meeting with the government next month — after the state government has been adequately sensitised about these issues," Mukhopadhyay said.

The letter from Mahato, Chaturvedi said, is part of the effort to sensitise the government about the health consequences of tobacco. "Look at this young man — he's only 26, but has only a 20 per cent chance of surviving for another five years."

Public health experts have estimated that four in 10 men in India consume smokeless tobacco, mainly in the form of chewable tobacco, while three in 10 smoke, and nine in 100 women chew tobacco, while only 2 in 100 smoke it.

Last year, a team of Indian cardiologists had demonstrated that chewing tobacco can constrict blood vessels of the heart within minutes and possibly raise the risk of heart attacks.

The study by doctors at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences had shown that men who volunteered to chew a single gram of tobacco had reductions in the diameters of their coronary arteries within 10 minutes of chewing.