

# India's Biggest Films and Tobacco Glamorization: A Manufactured Crisis



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# Executive Summary

India's tobacco industry is in structural decline. Youth tobacco use has dropped **42% since 2009**. Cigarette volumes have been shrinking for over a decade. The young generation is saying no to tobacco. Faced with a dwindling customer base, the tobacco industry – unable to advertise directly since 2003 – has doubled down on the one channel that remains open: the silver screen.

This report argues that the systematic glamorization of smoking by A-list heroes in India's biggest recent blockbusters is not artistic expression. It is **disguised marketing**, funded or incentivized by a desperate industry targeting the next generation of consumers.

The report documents the evidence, identifies the root causes, and makes the case for treating movies that glamorize tobacco exactly like tobacco products themselves – with **equivalent tax liability**.

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# Section 1: India's Biggest Films (2023–2025) and the Hero Smoking Pattern

India's theatrical box office generated approximately **Rs.11,500 crore in 2024** and **Rs.10,453 crore net in 2025**, with the top ten films accounting for roughly 33–41% of total collections. The highest-grossing films of the last three years are dominated by mass-action blockbusters, and in film after film, the hero smokes – and is made to look powerful, dangerous, and cool while doing it.

## 1 — 2023 — Bollywood Makes Smoking Aspirational Again

The three biggest Hindi blockbusters – *Jawan* (Rs.1,148 crore), *Pathaan* (Rs.1,050+ crore), and *Animal* (Rs.900+ crore) – all featured India's biggest male stars with tobacco imagery front and centre. Shah Rukh Khan's *Jawan* featured the star fighting with a cigarette in his mouth in widely-circulated action sequences. *Pathaan* was accompanied by a pan masala brand endorsement by Khan. *Animal* went furthest: Ranbir Kapoor smoked extensively throughout the film, with his hairstylist later confirming the actor smoked real cigarettes onset to stay in character.

## 2 — 2024 — Telugu Cinema Doubles Down

The biggest Indian film of 2024 – *Pushpa 2: The Rule* – earned approximately **Rs.1,800 crore worldwide**. Allu Arjun's portrayal of the smuggler Pushpa Raj is built on an outlaw persona inseparable from cigar imagery – scenes of the hero lighting up circulated virally across social media as emblems of swagger and defiance. *Kalki 2898 AD* (Rs.776 crore) and *Stree 2* (Rs.698 crore) rounded out the top films. Notably, *Bhool Bhulaiyaa 3* (Rs.313 crore) is a significant outlier: Kartik Aaryan's hero does not smoke – disproving any argument that hero smoking is commercially necessary.

## 3 — 2025 — The Pattern Continues

India's major 2025 release *Dhurandhar* (Ranveer Singh) has maintained the action-hero smoking spectacle formula. The convergence of a shrinking theatrical market – footfalls projected at 780 million versus a pre-pandemic 1.03 billion – and the need for high-octane visual spectacle has reinforced the casting of alpha, rule-breaking, tobacco-using heroes as a commercial template.

⚠ The pattern is unmistakable: India's top-grossing films consistently use cigarettes, cigars, and bidis as shorthand for masculine authority, outlaw cool, and unbreakable resolve. This is not a coincidence of casting choices. It is a **repeating structural feature** of how India's most commercially powerful films are designed – and it directly serves the interests of an industry that can no longer advertise its products by any other legal means.

# Section 2: India's Tobacco Industry — A Sector in Structural Decline

## 2.1 Declining Prevalence

India's adult tobacco use fell by **17%** between GATS 2009-10 and 2016-17. Cigarette smoking among men declined from 9.4% to 7.7% over this period. More recent NFHS data shows tobacco use continuing to fall – down 4.7 percentage points among men and 2.8 points among women. Most critically: **youth are leading this retreat**. Among school-going children aged 13–15, current tobacco use has fallen by **42% since 2009**.

## 2.2 Volume Contraction

The legal cigarette industry recorded a compound annual volume decline of **3.3%** between FY2012 and FY2019. The Union Budget 2026 raised excise duties by 22–28%, triggering a 5% volume drop in March 2026 alone and a projected 6–8% contraction for the full financial year. ITC shares fell 10%, wiping out approximately **US\$7 billion** in market value.

## 2.3 Revenue Contradiction

Despite falling volumes, revenue remains high due to price increases – not more smokers. ITC's cigarette EBIT for FY25 was Rs.21,091 crore (+5.1% YoY), but volume growth was only 2–3%. **The industry is squeezing more rupees from a shrinking pool of smokers, not recruiting new ones through normal commercial means.** Films are how it recruits the next generation, and it has been doing so deliberately since the 1990s.

## Key Tobacco Trend Indicators

Indicator	Data	Trend
Adult tobacco use prevalence	Down 17% (2009–2017)	Falling
Youth (13–15) tobacco use	Down 42% since 2009	Falling sharply
Cigarette industry volumes	-3.3% CAGR FY12–FY19	Contracting
March 2026 cigarette sales	-5% volume	Accelerating decline
Youth exposed to tobacco in movies	37.3% in past 30 days	High and persistent
Legal cigarette tax revenue	Rs.72,788 cr (2022–23)	Revenue still high
Illicit cigarette trade	~1/3 of legal sales	Rising with tax hikes

# Section 3: The Link Between Film Smoking and Industry Strategy

## 3.1 A Calculated Response to an Advertising Ban

India's COTPA 2003 banned all direct tobacco advertising. Research published in *BMJ Global Health* documents what happened next: **tobacco imagery in Indian films and television increased after the advertising ban came into force.** This is not coincidence. It is strategy. WHO's own study on Bollywood documented that international tobacco companies paid film stars to smoke on screen. Pan masala brands spent an estimated **Rs.1,200 crore annually** on advertising by 2023. In Q1 2022, over **2,000 instances** of tobacco surrogate marketing were recorded on social media platforms alone.

## 3.2 A-List Stars Are the Delivery Mechanism

Suniel Shetty turned down a **Rs.40 crore offer** from a tobacco advertiser. Anil Kapoor refused a Rs.10 crore pan masala deal. These rejections are newsworthy precisely because many others said yes. Shah Rukh Khan, Amitabh Bachchan, Salman Khan, Akshay Kumar, Ranveer Singh, and Hrithik Roshan have all endorsed pan masala brands at various points. Amitabh Bachchan eventually terminated his Kamla Pasand contract after an oncologist publicly called him out.

## 3.3 Youth as the Primary Target

WHO explicitly stated in 2024 that **the tobacco industry is targeting youth** to replace declining adult consumers. Nearly **40% of current smokers** initiated tobacco use before age 18. There are approximately **4.4 million underage daily tobacco users** (ages 15–17) in India, spending Rs.287 million annually on tobacco products. Among Indian youth aged 13–15, **37.3% reported exposure to tobacco imagery in movies** in the past 30 days.

# Section 4: The Policy Failure — Warnings That Don't Deter

India's 2012 Film Rules require a 20-second audiovisual disclaimer, a 30-second anti-tobacco health spot, and a static health warning every time tobacco appears. These rules were extended to OTT platforms in 2023. Yet these rules have **not stopped the glamorization**. The fundamental problems:

- **Display vs. Narrative Framing**

The rules regulate the *display* of tobacco, not its *narrative framing*. A hero can smoke surrounded by three health disclaimers – the disclaimers interrupt; the imagery seduces.

- **Unenforced Artistic Justification**

Editorial justification is essentially unenforced. CBFC lacks a formal, binding process to evaluate whether tobacco depiction meets the 'substantial artistic justification' standard.

- **Absurdly Low Penalties**

COTPA's maximum penalty for advertising violations is **Rs.10,000** – a rounding error for a Rs.100 crore film.

- **Ministry Sided With Film Industry**

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting historically sided with the film industry against health regulations.

- **Chronic Underfunding of Tobacco Control**

Despite collecting **Rs.72,788 crore** in tobacco tax revenue in 2022–23, the government allocates **less than 0.07%** to the National Tobacco Control Programme.

# Section 5: The Case for Tobacco-Equivalent Taxation on Films

The argument that movies where the hero smokes should pay the same tax as tobacco products is grounded in a simple principle: **if a product functions as tobacco advertising, it should face tobacco tax liability.** A 10% price increase leads to approximately a 5% reduction in tobacco use. Films deliver the equivalent of brand advertising – without a price tag. Taxing that mechanism at tobacco rates closes the subsidy loop.

## Proposed Policy Framework for Lawmakers

- 1 Tobacco Content Grading**  
CBFC to formally grade films by level of tobacco glamorization (incidental vs. hero-central/aspirational), with third-party public health verification.
- 2 Sin Tax on Glamorized Tobacco Films**  
Films where the hero's tobacco use is glamorized to attract an additional GST surcharge equivalent to the current tobacco GST rate (28% + cess). Revenue ringfenced for the National Tobacco Control Programme.
- 3 Production-Level Liability**  
Producers and directors held jointly liable, with fines tied to box office collections – not fixed rupee amounts – creating genuine deterrence.
- 4 Surrogate Advertising Closure**  
Pan masala and tobacco-surrogate brands barred from film integration deals, brand placement, and celebrity tie-ins.
- 5 Brand Placement Disclosure**  
Any film receiving payment from tobacco or tobacco-surrogate companies to mandatorily disclose this in opening credits and to CBFC.
- 6 NTCP Funding Floor**  
Mandate minimum **2% of tobacco tax revenue** to enforcement, cinema monitoring, and youth anti-tobacco programmes.

# Section 6: The Box Office Decline — A Desperate Industry

13%

Theatre Revenue Fall

India's film industry theatre revenues fell 13% in 2025.

780M

Projected Footfalls

Down from 1.03 billion pre-pandemic to a projected 780 million.

86%

Audience Dissatisfaction

86% of surveyed audiences say Bollywood content quality has declined.

13%

Hindi Film Drop

Hindi language film collections dropped 13% in 2024.

- ⊗ **A declining film industry and a declining tobacco industry have converged around a shared solution:** spectacle-driven blockbusters featuring A-list heroes as aspirational, rebellious, tobacco-using anti-heroes are good for ticket sales and good for tobacco recruitment simultaneously.

# Section 7: Global Lessons — Countries With the Lowest Tobacco Rates

The countries with the lowest tobacco smoking rates did not get there by accident. Their film industries are legally prohibited from glamorizing tobacco, or have adopted explicit tobacco-free content policies.

Country	Smoking Rate	Film/Media Tobacco Policy
Sweden	5.5%	Tobacco product placement in TV/films <b>banned by law</b> (SFS 2018:2088)
Iceland	~6%	FCTC Article 13 framework; strict advertising ban covers media
Australia	~11%	Tobacco placement in movies <b>illegal</b> — Tobacco Advertising Prohibition Act 1992
New Zealand	8.9%	Tobacco product placement in films illegal; classification reform ongoing
Norway	~9–12%	Comprehensive advertising ban including entertainment media
Finland	~12%	Nordic tobacco control; de-normalization of smoking in public culture
India	3.8% smoked / 28.6% all tobacco	Disclaimer warnings only; glamorization not penalized; weak enforcement

## Sweden: The Smoke-Free Nation Model

Sweden is on the verge of becoming Europe's first clinically smoke-free country – under 5.6% daily smokers today, down from nearly 20% twenty years ago. This was achieved through a **complete ban on tobacco advertising including entertainment media product placement**, smoke-free public spaces since 2019, progressive tax policy, and a free national Quitline since 1998.

## Australia: The Strictest Film Tobacco Law in the World

Under the Tobacco Advertising Prohibition Act 1992 (as amended), **product placement of tobacco products in movies is illegal** in Australia. Any film that functions as a tobacco advertisement is prohibited from cinema and TV broadcast. Australia's smoking rate fell from approximately 24% in 1995 to 11% today.

## The United States: The Surgeon General's Verdict

The US Surgeon General formally concluded there is a **causal relationship** between depictions of smoking in movies and youth smoking initiation. Giving movies with tobacco scenes an R rating would reduce teen smokers by 18%, potentially preventing up to **1 million deaths**. **37% of new youth smoking initiation** in the US is attributable to exposure to smoking in movies.

## Netflix's Global Tobacco Policy

In 2019, Netflix committed to a formal tobacco-free content policy: no smoking or e-cigarette use in TV-14 or below / PG-13 or below content, except for historical or factual accuracy. This established the global precedent that **heroes do not need to smoke to be compelling**.

Policy Lever	Sweden/Nordic	Australia	India (Current)
Tobacco placement in films	Banned by law	Banned by law	Not banned – disclaimers only
Film rating tied to tobacco	Cultural norm	Under discussion	Not linked
Penalty for violation	Advertising law fines	Criminal/civil liability	Max Rs.10,000 (COTPA)
Streaming obligation	FCTC-based	FCTC-based	OTT disclaimers only (2023)
Youth smoking trend	Lowest in EU, still falling	Consistent decline	42% decline; gains at risk

# Section 8: Tobacco Deaths and Disease Burden in India

Tobacco kills more Indians every year than any other preventable cause.

## 1.35M

Annual Deaths

Annual tobacco-related deaths in India – **1.35 million per year**

## 3,700

Deaths Per Day

Equivalent to 10 fully loaded jumbo jets crashing daily

## 267M

Total Tobacco Users

~267 million adults – 28.6% of all adults in India

## 4.4M

Underage Daily Users

Underage daily tobacco users aged 15–17

Metric	Statistic
Annual tobacco-related deaths in India	<b>1.35 million per year</b>
Share of all deaths caused by tobacco	11.72% (men: 16.18%, women: 6.71%)
Deaths per day from tobacco	3,700 Indians – equivalent to 10 fully loaded jumbo jets crashing daily
Cancer patients in India (2022)	1.41 million new cases – India ranks 3rd globally
India's oral cancer rank	2nd highest rate in the world – driven by smokeless tobacco
Total tobacco users in India	~267 million adults (28.6% of all adults)
Underage daily tobacco users (15–17)	~4.4 million

Tobacco is India's single largest risk factor for non-communicable diseases. Tobacco-linked cancers account for the majority of India's cancer burden. Tobacco is also a primary driver of heart attacks, strokes, COPD, and Type 2 diabetes. An average Indian smoker spends **8.43% of GDP per capita** on cigarettes alone, directly displacing food, education, and healthcare spending in low-income households.

# Section 9: India Can Thrive Without Tobacco — The Economic Case for Politicians

The tobacco industry's lobbying argument — 'you can't afford to lose our taxes and jobs' — is demolished by WHO's own economic analysis:

"For every Rs.100 received as excise taxes from tobacco products, the Indian economy loses **Rs.816 in costs.**"

Economic Indicator	Value
Total annual economic cost of tobacco	Rs.1,77,340 crore (US\$27.5 billion)
As % of GDP	1.04% of GDP
Direct healthcare costs of tobacco diseases	5.3% of all India's health expenditure
Government tax revenue from tobacco	Rs.76,000–87,000 crore annually
Amount allocated to tobacco control (NTCP)	Less than Rs.50 crore — under 0.07% of tobacco tax collected
Net loss ratio	<b>Every Rs.100 earned = Rs.816 lost</b>

## Tobacco Tax Is Not Irreplaceable

Tobacco contributes just **2.2% of India's gross tax revenue** as of FY2023-24. Total GST collections in 2024-25 hit a record Rs.22.08 lakh crore, growing at 9.4% year on year. Even a 1% improvement in GST compliance would more than offset the entire tobacco tax contribution. The government simultaneously spends far more treating tobacco diseases than it earns in tobacco taxes — a **net drain of over Rs.90,000 crore per year.**

## Eliminating Tobacco Is a Net Job Creator

A peer-reviewed study in *Tobacco Control* (BMJ, 2024), commissioned by WHO and World Bank, found that reducing tobacco consumption produces — after accounting for averted premature deaths — a net result of:

+0.22%	+1.36M	+US\$2.77B
Increase in GDP	Net new jobs (0.29% of the labour force)	Additional tax revenues

## The 45 Million Jobs Argument — Why It Collapses

The tobacco industry cites 45 million jobs as a reason politicians cannot act aggressively. This argument has three critical flaws:

- 7 million bidi rollers** — overwhelmingly women — earn as little as Rs.50–200 per day while the industry profits enormously.
- Tobacco farming is replaceable** — diversification programmes already exist in India's tobacco-growing states.
- The WHO-commissioned model shows **1.36 million more jobs are created** in the broader economy when tobacco consumption falls, because money redirected from tobacco flows into food, clothing, education, and entertainment.

# Section 10: The Politician's Brief — Five Facts That Demand Action

1

1.35 million Indians die from tobacco every year — 3,700 per day.

This is a preventable massacre.

2

For every Rs.100 collected in tobacco taxes, Rs.816 is lost in healthcare and productivity costs.

The government is running a catastrophically losing trade.

3

Tobacco represents only 2.2% of India's gross tax revenue

Replaceable many times over through existing tax system growth.

4

Eliminating tobacco creates 1.36 million net new jobs and increases GDP by +0.22%

Over five years, per WHO-commissioned modelling.

5

India's young generation is already rejecting tobacco — youth use is down 42%.

What is needed is political will to protect those gains — including stopping Bollywood from glamorizing smoking in blockbusters watched by hundreds of millions.

The argument for inaction has no mathematical basis. The argument for action is overwhelming. **India does not need tobacco. Tobacco needs India** — and that dependence is precisely what must end. If a Rs.1,800 crore film functions as a tobacco advertisement, it should pay tobacco taxes.

# Sources

*Sources: WHO India; Global Adult Tobacco Survey; NFHS-4 and NFHS-5; Global Youth Tobacco Survey 2019; BMJ Global Health; Tobacco Control (BMJ 2024); ITC Annual Report FY25; COTPA 2003; Vital Strategies; Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids; Truth Initiative; Tobacco Atlas; CDC; OECD Health at a Glance 2025; LA Times; BBC; Ormax Media; Economic Times.*

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## About This Report

This research report was authored by **Amit Gupta, Founder** of Indian.Community and published in **April 2026**. It documents the systematic glamorization of tobacco in India's biggest blockbusters, the structural decline of India's tobacco industry, and the case for treating films that glamorize tobacco with equivalent tax liability to tobacco products themselves.

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