

Centre must discourage smoking more forcefully: Amartya Sen

Staff Reporter

Points out that the state bears the cost of resultant diseases



Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen delivering a lecture on 'Cancer in India' in Kolkata on Monday.— Photo: Sushanta Patronobish
Asserting his faith in the freedom of personal liberties, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen on Monday called for “a more forceful discouragement” of smoking by the government, pointing out that the State did bear the cost of the diseases that resulted from the habit.

To the argument of smokers that they should not be stopped from smoking because they had the freedom to decide, Professor Sen, a cancer-survivor, said he did believe in personal liberties, but smoking did cause harm to others.

“Smoking influences the lives of others. Not just forcing proximate people to passive-smoking, but also through the medical cost of treatment of diseases that tend to result from smoking such as cancer. Given the limited amount of medical resources available, it draws on resources that could have been utilised for other ailments.” He said that while it did not constitute a case for prohibition, the government should discourage smoking more forcefully.

Delivering a lecture on “Cancer in India: How Serious a Challenge?” at the Second Foundation Lecture of the Cancer Foundation of India here, Professor Sen said cancer should receive greater attention in India.

“Cancer has often been seen as a disease that is particularly important in the rich countries. In India, the focus has traditionally been on the types of medical adversities that kill with abandon on a regular basis across the country, from cardiovascular and diarrhoeal diseases to respiratory infections,” he said.

He said the perception that in poor countries people do not live very long and that cancer was a relatively smaller threat as compared to diseases that cause mortalities such as communicable diseases may be a defective way of thinking.

His own example

Citing his own example, Professor Sen said he contracted cancer at the age of 18. Young people also are affected by the disease, but with life expectancy increasing even in a country such as India, the incidence of cancer was likely to rise.

He said he had a difficult time persuading his doctors of his “initially self-diagnosed” squamous-cell carcinoma of the mouth because of the perception that he could not have cancer because he was so young.

He pointed out that while habits such as smoking had declined in richer societies like the United States, it had become more common in countries such as China and India. Professor Sen dedicated his lecture to geneticist J.B.S. Haldane.